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Following the Priestess: A Novella Set in Nineteenth Century China

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FOLLOWING THE PRIESTESS:

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by Jeanette Roberts

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Introduction

I want to talk about how I chose to write this novella, its historical background, the process of writing it and what I have learned from writing it.

I was first exposed to China through its poetry, in Les Wolf's writing workshop. I heard that Durham University, England, where I planned to spend my junior year, has one of the finest Oriental Departments in the world. Besides being interested in Chinese poetry, I wanted to broaden my thinking through comparison with that of an Eastern culture.

Mr. Pratt and Mr. Barnes' ten unit Chinese civilization course was stimulating and refreshing. Taoism, a mystical and passive philosophy, fascinated me, especially when its ideas were illustrated in Chinese landscapes. I also wondered about the transition from the two-thousand year old Imperial system to today's: why change, what change, and how did it happen. Mr. Pratt, an historian, recommended books on late Imperial China, and suggested 1860-80 as a period of decline I could focus on.

I wanted to write a long piece of fiction before I graduated, so that I could take advantage of critics and of the pressure of due dates. I felt that with an early experience in novella writing I'd be more likely to try it again on my own. I knew I had to come up with an interdisciplinary project, and knew I could only do one long work in my senior year; hence, I chose to combine

novella and thesis, and utilize history, philosophy and religion along with creative writing and literature.

By summer, I knew that I wanted the novella to deal with Taoism, peasant religion, and the literate gentry lifestyle, all in the face of a disintegrating socioeconomic system.

Some causes of decline, which constitute the novella's historical background, were:

(1) During the eighteenth century, agricultural techniques were improved, and consequently, population exploded. Land lots grew smaller, as descendants continued to divide them. Peasants left their land and became bandits and rebels.

(2) In the second half of the nineteenth century, an unusual number of floods and droughts occurred, resulting in starvation and increased formation of bandit and revolutionary armies that plundered remaining peasants.

(3) Western countries, especially Britain, forced China to trade silver for opium. This caused inflation, which resulted in an increased tax burden for the Chinese peasant. Also, opium addicts, such as Chung Ho's mother, were a problem in all social classes.

(4) By the late nineteenth century, missionaries, backed by Western gunboats, made their way into China's interior. They opposed gentry leadership, and began to erode peasant faith in the gentry. They taught peasants to put religion above their duties to family and state, which was destructive to the Confucian hierarchy of responsibilities on which Imperial society depended.

(5) The Manchu government increased the number of gentry positions for sale. Gentry positions had traditionally been available only by passing extremely difficult examinations. Wealthy merchants and aristocrats made careless, corrupt administrators. Peasants lost the incentive to study and rise by merit, which was one of the balances of power that had kept peasants submissive. The class system was beginning to break down.

(6) The government kept increasing taxes on the already overburdened peasantry. The government had to pay soldiers to fight bandit and revolutionary armies. Also, to raise funds, the government had augmented the gentry population from 120,000 to 200,000 between 1850 and 1865. Gentry took a greater and greater share of tax dollars, so total tax increased to compensate. Peasants went into debt to greedy usurers, and often deserted their land to join bandits or revolutionaries.

(7) Peasants lost faith in the gentry and the Imperial government, and a more radical kind of revolutionary than ever before arose, the Taipings. Previous revolutionaries had just wanted to usurp the throne. Some Chinese communist historians say the Taipings started their tradition. The Taipings proposed to share land equally, and to establish a Heaven on earth. They were a fanatical quasi-Christian sect led by Hung Hsui-Ch'üan, who claimed to be Christ's younger brother. The Taipings' war-time practices included separation of the sexes, and the formation of a women's army. Their movement began in South China, and they enlisted peasant Hakkas, a cultural minority. I have dramatized

and exaggerated the differences between Han and Hakka to highlight the problems Rong experiences in acculturating to the Hakkas.

After fourteen years of Civil War, the Taipings were finally defeated by the Manchus in 1864. In order to defeat the Taipings, the Manchus had allowed local warlords, such as Yi, to arise. Later these warlord-gentry were involved in anti-missionary violence. They became more powerful and despotic in the twentieth century.

I wondered how the cultural upheaval of this period would affect Chinese people. I guessed that my main character would have to grow up during cultural change for me to find out. I decided to write about a woman partly because I am one, and partly because the traditional Chinese woman's role dramatizes, by its extremity, the rigidity of Chinese roles.

I also wanted the novella to dramatize what victimization can do to people, and parental, romantic, and student/teacher and friendship love.

I don't think the novella succeeds at these goals, or as the story of a particular individual at a particular time, despite moments of vivid description of scene and action. The characters are sketchy and the action catapults; emotions and insights can't develop.

The root problem is that I could never get a hold on either the Chineseness or humanness of my characters, although I could insert cultural details that made China immediate. Hence, the

dialogue is usually stilted; also, I tend to use dialogue to explain beliefs and actions, which is artificial, especially in Chinese culture, which is more nonverbal than ours. The novella might have worked better if I had used a narrator to give cultural information or had written an extensive cultural introduction.

If I had known last summer how difficult it is to project a culture of which you have no direct knowledge, I'd probably have set my novella in England. Next time I'll live in a place I write about first, until my imagination is much better developed than it is now. I've also learned that writing a long work involves a greater time-span of concentration than I had ever attempted; organization and character development become much more complex than in a short story. So does self-motivation; last fall I suffered periodically from critical paralysis. I wanted to write a master-work and couldn't. I've gained respect for novelists, even bad novelists.

With the experience of this novella behind me, I'll handle the problems of a long work better next time, and I hope someday to write a novel that works; this novella is a definite step towards that.

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Characters

I

Rong, a peasant girl

Her Mother, Father, Grandmother, and Uncle, Li Fu. Her cousins Nu, Tzi and Fui, and her Aunt.

The Priestess; Si Lo, a local man; the local magistrate and his runners.

II

Hakka female soldiers, including Sui Po, Rong's friend.

Chou Hon, a Hakka captain.

Hung, the King of the Taipings.

Yi, a captive fighting for the Taipings.

A Buddhist priest.

III

Chung Ho, Yi's elder brother, a Philosophical Taoist Monk.

Su Fu, a Hsien Taoist Monk, and two gentry ladies, his friends.

Chan, cook for the Taoist monastery.

Pui Bao, girl who teaches Rong to sew.

IV

Hui Pui, Rong's maid.

Tu Fei, Yi's wife.

Yi and Chung Ho's Mother.

The mother's servant, who is also a midwife.

Rong's son.

Chung Ho's yamen runner; a missionary lady and her husband.

Rong and Tu Fei's sedan-chair bearers.

The Priestess.

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I

The soil was moist, almost swampy, slapping under Rong's toes. She felt powerful, the creator of pops. Twilight nipped her ears and nose. The reeds watched her as she passed. She guessed that if she scared them, they would twine themselves around her and pull her down into the swamp. In her next life, she would be one of them. She'd heard that if eunuchs caught you lurking near the palace, they'd pull you down into a pot of hot oil, then bury you with honor, as one of them. Was it pity that made them honor you, in the end? They saw you were no different from them; all were flies unconscious of a spider's web nearby. Fate is the nameless supreme god. That's what Mother said, anyway. Rong didn't believe it; she would stay herself and always explore as she did now, and laugh at magistrates and old women.

This marsh was her favorite always-new world. Eerie sounds scared her, but she knew where to hide, and how to listen. She felt like one of the reeds, waiting, to guess what a stranger would do. Like them, she belonged here. The spirits of the place no longer seemed to crouch behind trees when she came; they went on chattering normally as they flitted through the air. She felt them in cold gusts and was comforted.

A crow skated across the sky. She wondered if it were the one she saw last week. "Hail, there," she thought to it, straightening her shoulders. It belonged to the sky as she did to the almost edibly rich earth. She and the crow would join Chu Yuan

in his golden chariot; Father had read her Chu Yuan last night, and she had dreamt of guiding steaming dragons as they spat rain all over the earth.

She shivered; clouds were knotting, darkening the sky. The reeds looked lonely, frail and naked. Was this fate for them? They would wait out the storm, clutching loose mud: many would fall, and become the mud that killed its child reeds. She would go home and wait for Mother in the warm kang, and hope for the reeds. In the morning, she would return and assess the changes. Birds would be singing, making all animals unsure the night-storm had been, until they examined the littered, fed and growing earth. She was a spy on important events. No one knew.

Her family's hut looked thin and shabby in the midst of rice paddies buxom for harvest.

Mother stirred vegetables over the fire.

"You lazy wife," Grandmother said to her. "This floor is rocky; my feet are sore." She gazed anxiously at her tiny feet and shook her head. "You know dirt-floors should be swept daily, and you know my feet are delicate. Deliberate vindictiveness. Your family neglected to teach you filial piety. Why, if my mother-in-law were here, you'd sleep the night outside for this."

Mother raised her eyebrows at Rong. Rong hated Grandmother when she picked at Mother; it was too bad Mother was supposed to tolerate it.

"Now that you have six winters, Rong, it is getting to be the time for your betrothal. Before we can find you a husband, we

must bind your feet."

Rong's eyes widened. She could get to the marsh, and stay there always. She did not want the pain her cousins cried from at night.

"Wait a while, Mother-in-law," Mother said quietly. "Let her have her childhood fun."

"No one asked your opinion," Grandmother said. "Of course you would defy me, and deny your daughter's best interests. You know that if her feet are unbound, she will be much less desirable as a wife. And, you know we must start the process soon; why put it off any longer? She'll put up a fuss whenever we do it. Her childhood has been quite long enough."

Mother looked at Rong and shrugged. Rong ran up to her and hugged her.

"Please, Mother, don't do it," Rong said. She began to cry.

"Go get the hot water and towels," Grandmother said to Mother.

Mother gently sat Rong down on the kang. She would not meet Rong's eyes.

"Don't cry," Grandmother said. "You'll be happy we did this when you are married to a prosperous man."

Who was she talking about? Rong would never marry; she was a little girl. Rong saw Mother put down the big bathing tub. She ran to the door.

"Stop her," Grandmother said.

"Rong, Rong," Mother called.

Rong ran square into Father outside the door. "What's all this kicking and screaming?" he said, holding her arms and laughing.

"Please let me go, Father," Rong screamed.

He looked at her quizzically.

"Bring her in," Grandmother shouted. "We're about to bind her feet."

Father frowned and looked pained. "So soon?" he mumbled. He carried Rong in. She lay limp in his arms. There was no use fighting all of them.

He put Rong on the kang. He and Mother held Rong down while Grandmother hobbled over. Grandmother broke Rong's feet quickly. Rong screamed. She saw Mother's face grow and separate, and become shimmering black dots.

When she woke, her feet were no longer hers. They were short stumps swathed in white. Pain pushed through them up her legs and to her head. She could not believe her feet could remain like this; perhaps if she slept, they would become whole again. She knew she could not stand on them; even when one foot just brushed the other, she felt like screaming. The sun would spot the marsh and she wouldn't know, not being able to get there. She cried and pounded the kang. Her legs and feet were like huge stones, holding her down.

Rong felt Mother's hand on her hair. Rong would not look at her. "This may be enough pain to placate the Gods, little daughter; perhaps you will suffer no more in your life. I hope so." What silly stuff was Mother saying? Rong socked the kang. All

that mattered was the pain, that would never end, Rong believed.

"I hate all people," Rong shouted. "I will crawl to the marsh and live there, eating bugs." Rong saw Mother frown, as though stabbed; Rong was glad she'd hurt Mother.

"Maybe you should go," Mother said.

Rong didn't know what to make of that statement. Mother was trying to hurt and confuse her, to make her feel as though she had no home.

"I'd go if I could walk!" Rong whispered, and broke into tears.

Mother extended her hand. Rong held her fingers as tightly as she could.

"In only four years, my daughter, you'll go to the home of your betrothed."

Rong and Mother swept the kitchen floor.

Rong shrugged. She still felt as though she would be eternally a little girl, eternally eleven. She had more housework to do now than she had before her feet were bound, and her feet continued to hurt, keeping her in bed some days. But she still limped to the marsh.

They heard Father laughing in the next room. "Our harvest will be even bigger this year than last, honored Mother," he said.

"We must have a grand ceremony of Thanks, with fresh eggs painted red for the clan, and gold paper to burn for the ancestors. Not enough given, though, to show our cousins how well we are

really doing." Grandmother laughed.

"Why give to Jo Fu, that good-for-nothing, when we can buy land for ourselves with the money?"

"He is your cousin, my son, and do be respectful. You will bring bad luck on us all. Now, if only you can pass your exams, my son, and purchase yourself a fertile concubine, we will be a credit to our ancestors. Your father, bless him, will be proud."

Grandmother should keep her mouth shut about Mother, Rong thought. If a new woman came Rong would put snakes in her bed. Mother swept impassively.

The priestess spoke sonorously. Rong hid behind Mother, but knew the priestess could see her anyway, if she wished. The priestess, with her black hair frizzed and eyes circled in red, looked ready to pass on her curse to anyone whose glance she met.

Father's eyes were also glazed, and on the priestess, as she moved around the ceremonial fire. Rong wondered if the priestess had already infected him with her curse. His eyes seemed larger than usual, but he waved at Rong in his usual jerks that were half-acknowledgement. A vein in his throat stood out.

Trees filtered wet wind. Rong felt it as cool fingers. The glade was near the village, by the stream: a secret place, nonetheless. Rong could see nothing but trees and wispy grass. Spring and Autumn rituals were always held here. The rest of the year it was empty, and forbidden. Rong came once, alone; all the village children were either too young or too old to come with her. They did not deserve the privilege of an adventure. That

day Rong had felt rain and wind coursing through the trees around her. The river's gurgling hid the intensity of the trees' action, which would drown you, deafen you, if you were aware of it. Rong felt water rushing, bursting in colors in her head. She ran away, and was surprised she was allowed to leave; she expected branches to deliberately trip her.

Now Rong saw spirits coursing through the priestess. Her eyes widened and narrowed, and she rocked. Her mouth opened and power came out. Rong heard it, though she could not see it, in the priestess' garbled sounds and gasps.

Father, as the village headman, threw the priestess handfuls of gold and copper cash. Some fell and hung glistening from her hair, like snakes. Rong wanted to be the priestess. As the priestess blessed all plants and beasts and earth-forces, she scooped the offerings in the dust into the fire, which grew.

"And so the Gods may be bribed for peace," Mother whispered. Rong frowned at her, surprised. Father turned, his eyes angry red, and slapped her.

"No words from infertile wives today," he growled. Mother's face blanched, but she stood straight. She must be in pain, standing long on her bound feet; Rong knew from experience.

Something was rustling and thumping beyond the trees. The magistrate, in his red satin robes, appeared on the backs of four men. He opened his chair's silk curtains, and emerged, splendidly fat and shiny. His large nose perched regally over his chin. Rong wanted to touch his robes that looked like ice. Maybe she could be his maid someday, and eat the remains of his pork, and no

one would bother her, because she could blackmail them through the yamen.

The magistrate's runners eyed Mother, leering. Rong frowned at them. They were gnarled and bony; much weaker than Father. She wished he would punch them; she would help.

Father stepped back, directly in front of Mother. Mother's lips were tight. Rong doubted that any of the other men would help him in a fight. Father looked bigger than usual today. She was proud of him; he was acting without Grandmother.

The magistrate did not watch his runners. He walked up to the priestess and bowed slightly.

"How long have you been here?" he said. Rong wondered at his funny, throaty accent.

"Not long," the priestess said, her voice cold and harsh. Her eyes were normal now, even a little dull. They were like Aunt Yu's eyes; tired and mute.

"We will take the rest of this cash, burn part of it to Confucius, and use the rest for the deputy governor's unexpected visit next week. You have burnt enough to serve your purpose."

No one spoke. All hunched their backs, and stared at the ground. The priestess' hands were on her hips. Rong could swear the priestess cursed the magistrate; the priestess' eyes were alive again.

The priestess' tongue came out. It was only half a tongue, slithery and lopsided. She lapped at the air.

The magistrate stepped back. He reddened. "Take this women and have her flogged," he said in a low voice. "Not to death.

Only ten strokes, for manners. Put her outside the village. She has evil in her eyes." He looked at her. "If you return to this village, you die."

She spat at his feet, but did not struggle as the runners tied her. They put their hands on her breasts and laughed, but she did not seem to notice. The women looked away, reddening, their faces tight.

The magistrate drooped, then stood straight. "The measures of grain you owe the emperor have been increased by one-tenth," he said, looking at each man. "There's the Taipings to suppress. Tax is due one week from this day. Peasants who can afford such offerings can easily handle more tax; come now, don't look angry. Remember, the army is stationed only seven miles away. Remember that they, too, must eat, and that they are the ones who protect you from the hill-bandits."

Grandmother pounded her cane into the soil. She stared at Father.

"When will the examination results be published?" he said quietly.

"No one from this village has passed." The magistrate shrugged. "I regret this."

Father looked down, but said nothing. Rong wondered if he would beat Mother later.

Uncle Fu, Mother's brother, stepped to cover Mother's other side. Runners were now eyeing the village girls, and winking at them. Their parents flushed, fathers tensing. Runners were of the lowest class, and their looks alone could contaminate a young

girl. At harvest, when the runners were expected to come for tax, girls and young wives were hidden. Rong was always surprised that Mother was hidden, too. Too bad Father didn't see Mother the way the runners did; Mother slept with Rong on the small kang.

The magistrate climbed slowly into his chair. His fat was not a bit awkward. The runners lifted it. Pads of flesh that had formed on their backs now seemed part of the chair and of themselves. They looked like wizened turtles chained together. The priestess, her hands tied to a long rope, was pulled to a fast walk. She tripped now and then, but never fell.

"What impertinence," Grandmother said loudly, after they had left. "Why, when I was younger, magistrates never dared disturb a fertility service. It brings bad spirits; he knows that, the greedy fool."

"He is a pig, like all Southerners," Father said. "Who told him, who betrayed our meeting place?"

Everyone looked at each other. Rong hugged Mother.

"Why, you are the only one to go near his yamen," Su Lo, Mother's cousin's husband, said to Father. "That's where you take your high and mighty lessons that we pay for. His secretary is obviously not the best teacher, right?" He laughed, then raised his eyebrows at Father.

"Not that we begrudge you the lessons," Uncle Fu interjected quickly. "But you have failed twice."

"Yes, it's time for someone else to have a chance at them," Si Lo said. He wound his thin queue around his fingers, a gesture he used only when afraid, Rong knew.

"Are you sure it was not you who told the magistrate, Si Lo?" Father asked with quiet intensity. He stared at Si Lo.

"Of course not," Si Lo twisted his queue desperately now.

"We know your ambitions for your son are high; high enough that you'd betray us for a few cash," Grandmother said, waving her cane. She had been the oldest member of the clan since Grandfather died three years ago; Rong remembered she had rarely spoken before he died.

"Strangle him, exile him," Yen Ho, Si Lo's neighbor said. Rong bet Yen Ho planned to marry Si Lo's wife and take his land; Si Lo's son was just her age.

"Perhaps his death would devour the bad ghosts loosed today," Uncle Fu said. "We have families to support; our land had better be fertile." Si Lo's wife fainted. Mother ran to her, and cradled her on her knees.

"Come on," Uncle Fu said. "Just exile him. It is the magistrate whom we should blame. Raising our taxes again in a bad year! No one from this village has passed the exams in twenty-five years. The exams are fixed, I tell you!" No one looked at Fu; all eyes pinned Si Lo.

Si Lo cried, his head down, as they held him. Rong moved from foot to foot. Was he really going to be killed? Father grabbed Si Lo's head, and Rong watched, holding Grandmother's hand. Si Lo's head shook and protruded as Father throttled it. Rong pressed her head down, trying not to think about the fragility of her own neck. Si Lo's eyes widened as he shivered the final time. Like the priestess, he now saw spirits, not people.

Rong hoped his angry spirit would not come to her warm kang. Where was the happiness she remembered before her feet were bound? There were no killings until Father joined that Society.

"We will bury him honorably," Father said, stretching his knotted hands and snapping the knuckles. "That will quiet him."

"Here are some pretty pebbles for you," Mother said, smiling. They clattered on the bricks on the sides of the kang. Rong sat up quickly. The stones were beautiful: green and grey and pink, with black specks, in various craggy shapes.

"Oh, thank you!" Rong said. She arranged the stones in stars and centipedes on and around her legs. She was a mountain range, and the stones were pagodas and cliffs. Then, she was herself, and the rocks were quiet eyes looking at her thoughtfully. She wished they would speak.

Sunlight from the doorway made her feel warm, though the air was cold. Still, she was glad to be under a quilt. Mother hummed as she swept the floor. Her movements were clean, easy, and regular. Rong felt familiar gladness and comfort. Mother seemed young today, and Rong could see why men looked at her. Today Mother smiled as though she had never cried.

A twinge in Rong's foot made her cry out. The color left Mother's clothes, and the outline of Mother pulsed and broke as she bent over Rong. She stroked Rong's hair, her usual gesture of pity. Rong still felt she was floating upside-down, then thumping the floor.

Rong turned her head away from Mother and cried. Would she hurt every day for the rest of her life? She swept the rocks off her body.

"Where's your husband?" A man wearing the colors of the yamen stood in the doorway. He shone, sweat-dappled, like a stream in the sunlight.

Rong stopped crying.

"He's out in the fields, as usual," Mother said quietly. She stood very straight.

The man nodded, then strode away. Mother leant on her canes in the doorway.

"What is he doing, Mother?"

"He's talking to your Father. Don't be so inquisitive, Rong; let me watch. Now he's tying his wrists. Oh, our fortune is thin; your poor Father."

"Hurry up," Rong said. "Get Grandmother!"

Outside Grandmother's door, Mother shouted, "Honored mother-in-law!"

"Why wake me so early, you good-for-nothing?" Grandmother limped out in her night-clothes. She looked somewhat alarmed.

"Go outside, Grandmother, now. Father is being arrested!"

Grandmother's eyebrows lifted and her jaw fell. "Clerk!" she called from the doorway. "Come, please!"

The pug-nosed clerk looked irritated, but came, leading Father by a short rope.

"The magistrate has ordered your son to be taken for the murder of Si Lo. No one will testify; I have been to ten houses.

But we know he did it, and it's only a matter of time before someone will come to us, begging to speak." He rattled coins in his pocket, and smiled, lifting his eyebrows. "Of course, the pao-chia headman will not report himself. Good day, old Mother. Bring us his food."

Father shrugged at Grandmother, and then the clerk pulled him away from the doorway. Rong could hear them disturbing gravel for a few feet, and then it was quiet.

"We will send your brother to the clerk," Grandmother said to Mother. "We will bribe the scoundrel. A shame: our savings gone. Still, there's always next year. Get Li Fu."

Mother nodded and left, jerking from side to side in her hurry.

"Will Father be beaten or beheaded?"

"Of course not," Grandmother said. "You exaggerate."

Rong remembered the hot noon when she had seen a bandit leader flogged to death. He had screamed and finally just groaned with each stroke, as if he were lifting large weights and sinking in the pain of it.

"Li Fu should also go to Yo Fu," Grandmother said.

"Yo Fu's daughter has just married the magistrate," Rong said. Rong had gotten sick on pork at the wedding feast.

"Still, he will listen. He has held land here for many generations. He doesn't want revolt, and understands why Si Lo had to die."

"I know that," Rong said, drumming her fingers. Grandmother always treated her as though she were stupid. "Yo Fu might not

want to fight the magistrate."

"You've got a lot to learn, Rong. For one thing, not to give advice to your elders."

They heard shouting at the next farm.

"What's that?" Rong said, trying to get out of the kang. She stood and pain pressed her down again.

"Oh, blessed ancestors, may they not come here. Bad luck is sleeping in our kang today." Grandmother began hiding food under the quilt. She pulled rolls and rolls of copper cash from her breast and buried them in the walls. Had the Taipings, whom Grandmother and Father whispered about, come?

As Rong watched, a ragged man ran out and pinned Grandmother's arms behind her back. The cash fell to the floor. He laughed wildly, pushing her to the ground, before scooping it up. She cursed him, but did not move. He laughed louder. Rong pulled the blanket tight around her knees but he pulled it off, and pushed her aside gently. Serious now, he stuffed his bag with rice and beans.

He filled his mouth too, and chewed. Rong was shocked; how could he eat rice uncooked? Through his rags she could see leathery skin. His hands were large and work-knotted, like her father's. Why wasn't he on his own farm?

"Get out," Grandmother said, sitting up and waving her canes. "No face comes from robbing women."

He spat at her. It trickled down her nose and she waved her cane towards his feet. He laughed as he sauntered out, the bag heavy on his bony back. Grandmother pulled herself up by her canes.

"Never will your father rob hard workers. That man has joined the demons."

"Why?" asked Rong.

"A bad crop or two, probably. I hear that farther North there is drought. Or maybe he is the youngest brother. But he should not spread his bad fortune to others. Nowadays the soldiers, too, may as well be bandits. In my day they protected us, and poor men became hired laborers. Now there are too many laborers for jobs."

Rong put her head to one side. "Should men die, to avoid stealing?"

"Yes."

Rong wondered whether Grandmother would still feel that way if Father were starving.

"Well, we'll get food from the clan," Mother said, sighing. Grandmother shook her head.

Rong lay down slowly. Her whole body shook. Since the priestess came, time went fast, and bad luck catapulted over itself. Obviously the priestess had cursed them. Rong wanted the priestess' power. She would kill all bad spirits, restore her feet, and make Grandmother leave Mother alone. How could she get the priestess' power?

Rong's bloated stomach growled for food. They had only one meal a day now, breakfast, and the sun was high. It would be a long time until tomorrow morning. She ate just enough millet gruel to feel the pleasure of chewing, of tasting. Even though they each had only a tiny serving, Mother cooked each meal tastily. All day Rong looked forward to the moment of first taste,

when she still had several bites.

She picked up her canes and carefully stood. She told herself to ignore the pain. The air smelled dry outside, and the light didn't warm her as it usually did. The bare fields looked as ill as she felt. It was winter, the proper time for fields, not people, to look depressed. New life always came to the fields in Spring, but when would it come for her and the village?

"Hello, little Rong." She turned and saw Li Fu. "Does your Mother have any spare food?"

"No," Rong said hesitantly. It was bad to not share with a relative. Rong imagined Li Si, Li Fu's baby son, grow gaunt, and scream hopelessly.

"We are going South tomorrow," Li Fu said. "Food hangs on trees and bushes, and there is so much land that even ten brothers can divide their Father's holdings and still live well."

"Grandmother says many bandits are from the South."

"That is one part of the South; this is another."

She did not know how to tell him she would miss him, and shifted her feet and blushed. Li Fu still teased her about the marsh and its ghosties that he said hung in her hair.

"When I have much land, I will come and fetch you and your mother, your marsh-ways and all. In the South there will be many places for you to play."

He rarely mentioned Father; he hated Father and Grandmother because they made Mother eat husks to save rice. Grandmother said she had eaten husks in previous droughts; it was a sacrifice a wife should be honored to make. Rong dared not tell Grandmother

she did not believe her.

"Why, Li Fu," Mother said. They bowed to each other, and smiled with real warmth.

"You are looking ill, Sister. That family of yours will starve you to death, if you don't stop them. Steal rice, or come to us. You are entitled to eat."

"Yes, yes," Mother said softly. From Mother's tone, Rong knew Mother would not act.

"Your husband's family paid a good price for you; now they renege on their obligation to us. It is disgusting."

"Calm down, Brother. You've your own family to worry about."

"If you wish to go with us, we leave tomorrow for the South."

"Don't say that so loud, Li Fu. The old woman is in the next room, and isn't hard of anything but heart. No, we will stay; it would bring shame on our name if I left with you, and what would I be in your household? An irritant to your wife. My husband is not mean enough for me to leave him, not yet, anyway." She looked at her swollen stomach.

"If you think a baby will change him, you're mistaken," Li Fu said. "You know it's likely to die or be ridden with bad spirits in this unlucky season. You're afraid to go; I understand that because I am, too. We will wait for you and Rong until sunrise."

Rong was amazed that Mother could be brave enough to disagree with her brother.

Father stepped in. He flushed at the sight of Li Fu, and would not meet his eyes. Li Fu barely bowed to Father.

"Come with me," Father said to Mother without looking at her. Rong sensed something strange in his tensed brows. Mother followed father from the house.

"Go, then," Li Fu said softly to their backs. "Come, Rong. You will visit your baby cousin a last time."

"All right," Rong said. "But don't walk so fast. Where are they going?"

"You'll find out. You were always too impatient to know everything, marsh sprite."

"Leave your cousin alone, Fui," Li Fu said, pointing at a gangly twelve-year old.

"She can stay by herself, then," Fui said, tossing his head.

"You have an ugly, bumpy face," Rong said, sticking her head forward. It felt good to insult Fui; he deserved it.

Fui reddened and quivered. Rong stepped back a little. Nu's face puffed as she stifled a laugh. Tzi laughed, her small chiseled face puckered, her eyes shining.

Fui slapped Nu. Tzi giggled. Nu slapped Tzi, and Tzi cried angrily. Rong's eyes widened, and she turned around a little shaken. Rong had never seen people hit each other in public.

"I'd like to hit you too, Rong," Fui said. Rong stepped back. Why was she with her cousins, and not with Mother, wherever she had been sold? She noted Fui's fragile boniness, and no longer feared him. She wanted to kick him and laugh.

"What kind of son are you?" Li Fu said. "You beat your

sisters for no reason; no wonder they don't honor you. I'd better not see you do that again, and I'd better not see you touch your cousin. I am the Father here, not you. Remember that."

Tzi sniffed, still cradling her head. She ran to Li Fu, who held her and stroked her hair. Rong watched them as though through glass. Father never had hugged her; sometimes, when they read together, he looked as though he wanted to, but would continue reading. Mother touched her, but only when they were alone. Grandmother's hugs were ritually firm and emotionless.

"What an ugly face you have, Rong," Nu said, laughing. Nu was Rong's age.

Rong looked around for Li Fu, but he had gone.

Fui nodded gravely. "Good job, Nu," he said, smiling. "I wish that would go away." He pointed at Rong without looking at her.

Rong felt herself get hotter. She looked around her, over the rolling bare hills for a place to hide until night. Li Fu and his wife had the only covered place, a deserted shed. She walked a few steps and felt like a tree about to be cut, as cold wind banged her.

She heard Fui and Nu and Tzi laugh as Fui spoke. He was probably telling a story. Rong bet his stories weren't as good as the ones she told herself in the marsh. She felt stabbing through her feet and sat down on the hard, cracked earth. She felt tears come and sat rigid, afraid her cousins would see her weak. They continued laughing in the distance. How could they laugh when her

stomach and feet throbbed? They were bad humors of the soil. Their laughs sounded like the squeals of pigs. Rong saw pork curling delicately over rice, with Mother smiling near the dish in her New Year's red jacket. What a splendid field of red the jacket made; Rong had loved to look at it. Where would they be this New Year? They must be at home again by then. How did you find a woman who had been sold? Her cousins laughed again; Rong wanted to slap them. She took off her jacket and shivered. She curled tight on it, pretending a quilt was over her, and that she was in the warm kang with Mother beside her. She still felt the wind, but it touched her with less violence now.

"Here's a root to chew, Rong," Li Fu said. He held up a scraggly thing with fists of soil dried on it. "Suck and chew the dirt and tendrils, now. That will make you forget you are hungry, old marsh sprite."

They had been walking for three days up the winding Yangtze, and had found no food. Farmers frowned at them and gripped their canes manacingly. Rong had hoped the first farmers would help them; she never glanced at them anymore.

"Li Fu," his wife called querulously. He looked down.

"Come sleep with the children, Rong; you'll be warmer."

She shook her head. She would not look at him.

"I'm sorry she won't feed you anymore, child. We've only a few beans left, anyway. They're not really worth much more than the root." His voice died off.

Rong hoped he felt ashamed before Mother and his ancestors. Even though Rong was only a girl, she was his elder sister's child

whom he had offered to care for. She heard him clear his throat. She did not know how to speak to him now that he was no longer her wholehearted friend.

"Well, goodnight then, child," he said in a low voice, turning. Rong didn't want him to walk away; she wanted him to do something, or at least stay with her. It was almost dark. Last night she'd slept in a shed with the family, though alone at one end. She had dug deep in their sleep-sounds and body-smells, and slept well. She dared not sleep alone; spirits would grab her and pull her down through the cracks in the soil. No one would know. She made a jerky movement to get up quickly, then stopped. Fui, Nu and Tzi would laugh at her if she ran after their father. She would wait until it was fully dark, then find him.

She chewed at the root. It was like chewing dry sticks and string. The soil was the best part, salty and mealy, almost like uncooked rice. She pretended that that's what it was. She felt better, then tearful, by turns. It hurt to starve.

Under a tent of their jackets, Fui, Nu and Tzi looked like a lumpy turtle. Rong walked slowly, thinking, "I'll knock their shell apart." She stopped and waited. The wind was colder than it had been.

Tzi moved, and saw her. "Rongy-dongy the night isn't cozy," she said, giggling.

"Hush," Nu said, squeezing Tzi's hand.

"Ignore our cousin," Fui growled. "Let her sleep alone, since she likes to be alone."

Nu looked out and saw Rong shiver, her face set. She

beckoned her over, then put her finger to her lips. Slowly she moved over. Rong sat on the warm bit of ground Nu had allowed her, and relaxed. She looked at Nu carefully. Nu smiled, her tiny features coming out of sourness for a little while. She wasn't as ugly as Rong had thought. Rong smiled at Nu.

Fui snorted, then was silent. He settled under the jackets, and the girls followed. Nu and Rong held hands for a while. Rong marvelled at the softness of Nu's hands; Mother's and Grandmother's were rough. Rong felt light and drowsy, though her stomach, feet and rock-punched back hurt. The pain was even and forgettable.

They started walking, as usual, when the sun came up. Li Fu shook Fui, and called to the rest of them. After every hour or two of walking, Rong and Li Fu's wife would have to stop to rest their bound feet. Rong envied Nu; Nu's feet were unbound, and she strode easily, as Rong once had. Li Fu said he wanted Nu to be able to help him in the fields; also, Nu was so ugly that even bound feet would not help.

Li Fu's wife stopped and sat heavily. "Begging relatives are a disgrace," she said, raising her eyebrows at Rong.

"Quiet," Li Fu said, waving his arms.

"Look," Fui said, pointing ahead. Towers rose between two hills. Rong had never seen buildings except when Father had drawn them. She had asked Father what they were, and been unable to believe people could build whole hills of steps topped by high columned temples. On top, she would feel like a bird or flying

dragon, the world below tiny and absurd. They walked over a graceful stone bridge. Rong knew it. She was in a painting.

II

"Come on, Nu," Rong wheedled.

"But Tzi's my sister."

"She's too little to be quiet. We'll be caught for sure. We can give her some of what we get when we get back. She better not tell, though."

"Who's going to believe a little girl?" Nu said.

Rong bit her lips. If Tzi told, and the Taiping troops believed her, she and Nu could be beheaded, unless their ages excused them. Rong could see Chou Hon, their commander, her delicate features jutting crags as she lectured the Women's Camp on right behavior. Chou Hon would kill herself without a sigh, if ordered, and would smile at an execution's efficiency. Rong imagined herself shivering on the platform, with jeering Hakka women silently crowding around it. All because of Nu's extreme family loyalty.

"We could take some of it to Fui," Nu said, her head to one side. "Yesterday I saw him carrying firewood. His eyes bulged out and he panted. His neck looked long, like a chicken's. They're turning him into a coolie. I could see welts on his back from the wood he carries."

"I hope your Father doesn't see him."

"It doesn't matter; he wouldn't do anything to help him." Nu

kicked a rock.

Rong didn't know what to say, and watched a crow cross the bright sky.

"You know, Rong, maybe we shouldn't try this." Nu hugged her knees.

"You never do what you promise, Nu," Rong said, raising her hands. "We've backed out three times. Let's go now, before we change again."

"You're always rushing, Rong. Just be quiet or I'll go back."

"Don't do that." Why was she begging Nu? She could go by herself. "Go back, then," Rong said after a while.

"I'm not scared; I'm just not stupid. We could sit here and pretend we stole the food, and are eating, and have fun, and be safe."

"But we haven't eaten," Rong said, stamping her foot. "I told you, it's safe." She was surprised she could say that with conviction. The storeroom was unguarded, and in a lonely place. Rong had found it while exploring one day.

They walked slowly. "There it is, Nu, beyond those trees."

"That shed?"

"It's not a shed, it's made of rocks, see?"

"I'm not going," Nu said, shaking her head.

"Don't be a baby." Rong's voice became more desperate as Nu shook her head again. Nu turned. "Rong, I'll wait," she said. I'll be lookout. I'll whistle if someone comes." Nu looked around efficiently.

"Oh, all right," Rong said. She walked down the path between the last wispy trees. She stopped at the clearing, and considered running back. She listened hard for Nu's whistle. Could she hear it from here? She drew a quick, full breath and ran forward. The hut was empty, as before, except this time Rong felt hungry spirits lurking deceitfully in the air. She stuffed her bag with rice and squash, and ran out.

Nu emerged from behind a bush. She smiled. "Let's hide this, and later we'll feast. We can build our own fire."

Although they had not eaten, Rong felt much stronger as they walked back towards camp. But she was glad Nu was with her; it was getting dark and the spirits might have followed her from the storeroom.

"I'll tell Fui to come late tonight," Nu said.

Rong nodded. Nu hadn't done anything, and now, she felt entitled to share the reward; were people always like that? Rong didn't want to make Nu angry. If Rong did, she would have no one to sleep with, play with or talk to.

"Nu," Rong whispered, shaking Nu's arm. Nu's tiny features looked evil in the dark. She opened her eyes and stared at Rong. Rong felt her hostility, a stranger's, and drew back. Nu sat up, and was bland Nu again, batting her eyelids sleepily. They tiptoed past drowsy Hakka women guards. Rong imagined one of their lead hands smashing her face, and shook.

The night was roomy and fresh-scented, unlike the long hut

they had just left. Rong's breathing slowed and she walked straighter. Food to look foward to! She would cook the rice with red sauce as a soup, the way Mother did. She felt her stomach contract as she thought of Mother; she would not let that thought ruin tonight. Fui would be impressed by her at last, although he would not show it. He treated her as Father did Mother, with disdain. Did he fear her? Maybe the food would convince Fui and Nu to trust her. Sometimes Nu and Fui talked as though Rong weren't present; but when Nu was alone with Rong, Nu treated her as a friend. Rong couldn't understand it.

"You've already started cooking?" Nu said to Fui. Fui was stirring white gruel, the kind Rong didn't like. Why was he acting like it was his food? He'd never given Rong anything.

"Why are you so pale, cousin? Afraid of the damp?" Fui chortled. "Aren't you excited about eating your fill again?"

"Rong's angry about something; I can tell," Nu said in a tired monotone. "What is it this time: pitying yourself about your Mother again? We've all got problems."

Rong couldn't believe Nu had said that. Nu looked away.

"Your Father has shamed our ancestors; our Father has never sold Mother, no matter how poor we got," Fui said.

Rong blushed. Grandmother had taught her to be proud of her family; they used to be richer than Li Fu's, and were more educated than any other in their village. She wanted to hit Fui. His eyes were sparkling excitedly. So were Nu's. They wanted to fight. She shifted feet. There were two of them. She glanced at Tzi, who played with sticks near the fire, humming to herself.

"If you leave, you'll get none of the food you stole," Nu said.

"Of course, no one from our family would steal," Fui said. "You were right to make Rong do it."

Rong felt hot and unsteady, and suddenly like running away.

"Look at her expression, Nu," Fui said, shaking his head. "If you want to eat with us, Rong, you'd better learn manners."

"What can she do to apologize, Fui?" Nu asked.

"She could give us that charm bag that's around her neck," Fui said, looking up. He smiled weirdly.

Rong clutched the bag. Mother had bartered many pairs of shoes for that small piece of satin. Once bright red, it was now dark and stiff from her sweaty palms. Its hardness showed how strong a protector it was. Rong could feel its power push against her hand, and then it was mere cloth again.

Nu stirred the gruel. "Do you want to eat or not?" she said to Rong in shrill tones. The gruel's smell reminded Rong of long winter evenings at home when she ate slowly, feeling safe from the cold outside. She wanted to feel the heat and roughness of the gruel in her mouth and throat. It was her gruel, not theirs. She hated them, and herself. They were the only people she knew; without Nu, the Hakkas would seem a hundred times more threatening. Maybe the bag would be the last concession, though she doubted it.

"All right, take it," Rong said, pulling off the bag and breaking its string. She tossed it at the ground near Fui. Fui smiled. "Thank you for the gift, cousin." Rong could hear hate and triumph in his manicured tone. She would pray to Mother to

change the bag to a bad-luck magnet.

Nu awoke a sleepy Tzi and handed her two sticks. Fui had already started stuffing the gruel into his mouth. Rong was not going to let him have all of it, and ate as much as she could. The gruel felt as she remembered it, but she ate so fast that she could not savour it. She blamed Fui. Nu was eating stolidly, staring at the gruel.

"I'll finish it," Fui said, glaring at Rong. Rong sat back on her heels, tense. She felt herself redden. Nu withdrew matter-of-factly. Rong slumped, hating Fui and herself. What could she do?

"Our cousin is learning, eh, Nu?" Fui said. He smiled crookedly.

"Shut up, coolie." Rong stood, shaking a little. Fui looked at her bitingly for a long moment. Rong looked back at him, feeling herself begin to go soft. He rose and slapped her quickly, and she staggered back, confused. Her face rang and pulsed. She touched it wonderingly. It was tender and hurt.

"You'll answer politely, from now on," Fui shouted. "Apologize!"

"I do," Rong said quickly, feeling tears run down her cheeks. Now she knew how Mother felt when Grandmother shouted at her. There was nothing to do but give in, and she cursed silently. Grandmother would call her weak; she was ashamed.

"Look at this one's feet," a fat Hakka woman guffawed. She pointed at Rong's.

Rong had been binding them herself since Mother was sold. She looked down at them. They did look sloppy. The cloth was dirty and frayed; no way to wash it. She'd considered stealing cloth from the robes of the sick or the dead, whom she saw when running errands for the guards to the informary. She'd decided the cloth might bring disease. But the Hakka women's feet were dirtier than hers; why did they laugh? Unbound, their feet were huge boats. Rong rarely stared at them from politeness and fear. Such large feet would ruin the marriage prospects of any young Chinese girl. Rong was ashamed for the Hakkas. They were too stupid to realize how awful they looked.

"What idiocy to cripple a child," a hawk-nosed woman said loudly.

"Yes, we'll put you back together," the fat Hakka said. She examined Rong's feet with her eyes. Rong squirmed and wished she were in the marsh alone.

"Sit down and put out your foot, girl," the fat Hakka added. She bent over Rong. She smelled like old ashes and rancid milk. Mother or Grandmother would have drawn away, disgusted, but Rong didn't dare.

"Ooonwend," the hawk-faced Hakka said. "The stupid Hans," she added when Rong just stared at her.

Rong blushed. They laughed, pointing at her. She felt

ashamed again. But it was they who spoke funny; of course she couldn't understand their strange accent.

She unwrapped her left foot slowly. It was a bruised, bent old woman, the skin cracked and withered.

"Ugh," the hawk-nosed Hakka said, spitting near her. Rong tucked her foot under the other leg. It felt cold in the dry wind.

"Those Hans are barbarians," the fat woman said. "Look at her." She shook her head.

Rong slowly unwound her other foot. Would this enable her to run again?

"The women want to suffer; it's their twisted nature," the hawk-nosed Hakka said. "Then they can avoid work."

"Right," the fat one said. "But children are blameless. I'll take this girl with me."

Rong wondered what the Hakka would do to her; burn her in oil and watch, laughing? That's what Grandmother said Hakkas did with children they kidnapped. The Hakka woman's skin was stretched and loosed, bunching in warts on her dark face. Her legs and feet were of tremendous size. Rong had heard that Hakka women kicked their men into submission, perverting nature. She could see that they could.

"Come on, girlie." The fat Hakka raised her brows at Rong. "To wood-gathering we do go."

Rong gulped and stood. At the first step, she tottered, and cried out. She was afraid to fall; the Hakka might beat her. She supported herself painfully on her canes, and looked at the Hakka.

The Hakka looked down. She stepped over to Rong and gave her her arm. Rong drew back slightly.

"Step slowly, girl," the woman said gently. Rong's eyes widened. She felt like allowing herself to cry.

"We only meant to help," the woman said, shrugging. "And we need you to work; you can't carry much when quivering on canes."

Rong nodded, biting back tears. She thought about how the trees bristled and how the Hakka wasn't evil, trying to drown out the pain of walking.

"After a while, the pain will go away, and your feet will be yours again," the Hakka said quickly. She glanced at Rong. Rong felt the Hakka was trying to reassure her, although even the Hakka wasn't sure the cure would happen.

"Your Mother is in the camp?" asked the Hakka.

Rong shook her head.

The woman bowed and shrunk; she seemed embarrassed. She looked less ugly now, and vulnerable.

"I hope we did not kill her."

"No," Rong said, gulping.

"We have fought Hans for centuries, but I hate to see children left. I know what that is like."

Rong looked straight ahead. Perhaps now the woman would begin a long string of complaints.

"We say we are your allies now, against the Manchus, but it is hard to trust, as you must know. I saw the way you looked at us when we asked you to unbind your feet. I saw myself as you saw me for a moment, as a witch. See, my nails are too short for

that," she added quickly, looking at her woody hands and laughing.

Rong looked at her typically blunt Hakka profile. The woman turned and smiled, raising her eyebrows. Rong returned it, taking a deep, shuddering breath. She was not at home any more; what her parents taught her about ignoring strangers would not work here.

"Let's stop. You gather wood until the pain is great, then wait for me. Oh, by the way, I'm Sui Po. You are -- ?"

"Rong."

Rong tried to work quickly, though her feet increasingly hurt. She had feared the Hakka's stern tone, just then. Mostly, though, she wanted to please Sui Po, to make her like her more. She sensed her friendliness was not self-serving like Nu's, but more like Mother's.

"That's plenty! You can stop, Rong. You can stop!"

Rong hadn't heard her and unbent slowly.

"Rest," the Hakka said briskly, tying the wood for carrying. "Who knows, maybe the Taipings will bring us a new world where we'll all own land and eat pork. This gathering wood and talking to you is not bad; it's better than starving or waiting to attack the Manchus. At least we have a plan, and hope. It's better than burning incense to impotent old Gods."

Rong blushed. How dare the Hakka blaspheme! Many spirits could be listening. The Hakka winked.

"You see, God has spoken to me," Hung said. The crowd stilled. Hung raised his long arms. His white robe hung from

them, translucently shimmering.

Rong was fascinated by it. How different from the rough cotton she had always worn. How could such thin cloth hold together?

"I am filled with God -- not like a Shaman, who screams with the Devil's voice, but with the real, all-powerful one God. He has chosen me, humble scholar that I am. He will reward us all, he says, with Heaven, if we kill those accursed imps, the Manchus." He looked around at them. His eyes were sharp, his movements energetic. The crowd hushed.

"And for those who disobey, there is only fire, fire and pain through all time." He looked at them searchingly, nodding his head.

Rong wondered if she was already condemned and didn't know it.

"Know what it is to have the power of God flow in you," Hung continued. "Accept him, and remain his loyal child."

Rong looked at Sui Po. Her head was forward, her eyes wide open.

"When you have God holding you, supporting you, victory must be yours. We show that, we Taipings. We began as three poor scholars talking over wine, and now we have nearly vanquished the worst usurpers in all China's history!" he shouted, shaking his fist.

Now she understood. If she had prayed to the right God, this Taiping God, and not to the soil, Fui would not have humiliated her, nor would her feet have been bound. She might have had as

much land as Hung did by now. Mother would not have been sold.

"What does God demand?" Hung said loudly, his head to one side. "Like our honored ancestors, he demands loyalty, reverence and absolute obedience. Anyone who pretends to be one of God's every-victorious army, but doesn't obey, is a thief, an ungrateful youngest son, and will be killed."

Rong's heart beat fast as she realized she had committed a crime; she had stolen food. What would be her punishment?

"You are all God's children," Hung continued. "As brothers and sisters, sex would be incest. That is why your families are dissolved. After we conquer the Manchus, you will be given God's grace. You will have proven yourself by obedience. You will rejoin your families, on your own fertile land."

The women cheered. Rong joined them gladly; shouting was music. Sui Po, however, was silent, her head cocked, and brows knit.

"You, as women, can fight. The Confucians don't realize your capabilities; they keep you at home. Our God appreciates the mettle of those such as Chou Hon, your leader. When our Kingdom is established, your lives will be better than you have ever dreamed. You, with God in you, will keep the power you have now, and gain more as your belief in him grows."

Sui Po cheered and clapped. Rong and the other women looked at her, then joined her. Now Rong knew for certain that Hung was really God's voice. Sui Po believed it.

"Feel God in you, feel him!" Hung raised his long, white hands high. He was tall and gray, but straight. He seemed eternally young and resilient.

Rong looked for God inside her. Where might he be? In her toes? She tightened her body until it hurt, and asked and pleaded with God to show himself. Mother, who had cared for her, was gone. Sui Po was in her own ecstasy. If only God would sing in her limbs, be hers.

They swept into the village, packing the street's loose soil. They carried their packs over their shoulders, and swaggered like men. Villagers came to their doorways and stood, mouths open, and quiet, except for the small children who asked: "Why do those ladies look so funny, Mama?" The children were hugged into silence. Scrawny dogs ran out from behind huts, barking, their heads to one side, their wispy tails raised uncertainly.

Rong shivered at the back of the mob. She tried to imitate Sui Po's Hakka stride, despite the pain in each foot as it hit ground. She felt the villagers' eyes bore into her face and feet. Unbound, her feet were like seaweed, uglier than the Hakkas'. Rong blushed. Perhaps the local women thought their daughters' feet would now be unbound too; that was why they looked alarmed.

A Hakka nudged a Kiangsi woman with a pack on her back. She fell heavily. A few Hakka women guffawed. Rong looked at Sui Po, whose mouth was set straight.

They came to the square in the village's center. Here, Rong felt even more like a performer. Sui Po smiled at her and she began to like being in a military parade. She felt that if she screamed, everyone would cheer. Pointing towards a squat, off-white temple, Rong watched Sui Po's throat shrink and grow. The

power in her movements was beautiful. Rong was proud of her. Rong shouted, and felt the sounds pushing themselves out. They lifted Rong, and strengthened her. She stood at ease, but tense, not aware of herself, but rather of each nuance in the crowd's mood that was hers too.

"Come," Chou Hon cried. "Show your God that you hate idol-worship; prove yourself to him." She unsheathed her short, stocky knife, and strode away from the crowd, her eyes on the temple. She seemed to forget the women, but they shouted, and followed her like straining dogs. Their cries were low and sharp. Chou Hon toppled the benign Buddha standing near the temple-door. It broke like a mere porcelain dish, but looked like a man's guts spread and hardened over the soft earthen floor. His smile remained intact, and Rong had a feeling it watched them. Did he smile because he knew he would have his revenge? The Hakkas stood quietly for a moment, watching him. He did not move, although Rong thought his smile twitched. It couldn't if the Taipings were right about the impotence of idols. She whispered her fears to Sui Po. "Devil's tricks," Sui Po said, shaking her head. Sui Po was sweating, and her brows were knit. Rong couldn't tell whether she was afraid, nervous or just angry.

A man in long, tattered robes sidled in through a side door. Because he shook so as he moved, he seemed constantly bowing. His eyes were loose. They bounced, large and yellow-rimmed, with each slight shake of his long torso.

"Will you help us, old man?" Chou Hon said.

"No," he said, clearing his throat. "I am a priest. This is my. . . ."

"He is the Devil," said Rong loudly. She hadn't noticed Chou Hon's signal for quiet, and looked down, blushing. Sui Po grabbed her hand.

"Are you the Devil?" Chou Hon asked the priest.

"No, why. . ." His voice trailed off and he looked at them. The veins on his neck stood out.

"Kill him," a voice with a strange accent shouted. "My child is dying because he cursed her. I saw him skulking around our house last night. Just because we would not give to his temple. . ."

The women looked at each other. Their eyes flashed. Then they looked at their hands. Sui Po's fist was clenched. Rong remembered when her Father had killed the informant; everyone had stood thus, hesitant to strike, but wanting to.

"Murdering devils must die; it says so in the Taiping Canon," Chou Hon said.

"Then let him die," Sui Po said, drawing out the last sound. Her voice had a wild quality Rong remembered hearing when Sui Po had spoken of her husband's death. He had died fighting for his land.

Sui Po stopped and lifted a large piece of the Buddha, and threw it, her powerful arms rippling. It hit the priest beside his nose. At the sight of his blood the women laughed and shouted, throwing more bits of rock and porcelain.

"Burn him with his accursed temple," Chou Hon said. They tied the broken, crying mass of blood and pulsing fat to a pillar and lit a fire under it. They stood at the doorway and watched him writhe and dry until the flames clawed high and the ceiling

began to crack. A couple of times Rong felt Sui Po move forward slightly, as if towards him.

Rong grabbed Sui Po's hand and held it during the worst screams. Like the informer, this man had to die; still, Rong hated to hear him cry out the way she would if in pain. The women looked at each other. Why did evil beings look and sound like everyone else, when they weren't? Perhaps he would burn into an object that showed his real identity. Rong stepped back and forth as she heard him scream again and again. It was getting to be dull, predictable. The sun sent a long beam in the man's direction; Rong wanted to follow it out of the temple to a quiet meadow where she could play games with Nu, or better, with Sui Po. The fire of the mob in her was dying, she felt. People stood around her, looking exhausted and dejected. She could not believe they had done this; the temple was beginning to fall around them. The priest had stopped screaming.

Rong backed down the steps, stumbling a little. Her head throbbed and she felt brittle. White dust itched her eyes. The steps, and nearby buildings were blindingly white in the noonday sun. She blinked. His death must have been the right thing. It had made her one of the Hakkas, that was good. Mother would be glad she had a fine woman friend to take care of her. Mother would just have to understand the execution and temple-burning. Mother had gone to temples often; Rong was glad the Taipings didn't know. With her tiny feet, Mother would arouse the jeering

the Kiangsi women did. Maybe it was better Mother wasn't there? What a traitorous thought; Rong hoped Mother wasn't listening. You could never be sure of privacy.

Coming off the lowest step, Rong tripped and fell. Someone had been listening; a moment ago she had been fine, and now she rose, dazed and afraid, dust drying her mouth.

"You're all right," said a high, strident male voice. "You fell as hard as the Great Wall!" He laughed. Rong looked at him from the sides of her eyes. He was tall and thin, with Taiping long hair that was only half-grown and stood out all over his head.

He looked up the steps. "So, you're one of the massacrers," he said. He brought his brows together, and his square jaw lowered over his delicate neck. "Maybe it's too bad you're not hurt." He shifted the packs on his back.

"What do you mean?" Rong rose on her toes, then came down sharply. "He was a Devil! Where I lived, we only killed evil ones; that's what he was."

"Aw, come on. Spirit-stuff is nonsense, whoever preaches it, Taiping or Buddhist. But to unlawfully kill, to unlawfully destroy a temple: these acts will lead to the Taiping's downfall. Rulers who can't rule right lose their mandate. I guess, being a girl, you didn't know that."

Rong raised her brows. She'd ask Sui Po what she should do. What did they call people like him?

Sui Po came down the steps, looking exhausted. Smoke seemed to hang in her hair, pulling it limp. Her eyes were bloodshot,

her mouth droopy, her skin blotched with ashes.

"Well, girl," she said slowly, putting her arm around Rong. Rong relaxed in the arm's strength.

"Who's he?" Sui Po whispered. The boy again rearranged his packs.

"A heretic, I think," Rong said slowly.

"What were you saying, boy?" Sui Po asked, searching his face.

"Oh, just praising your day's work at the temple. An abomination removed." He nodded his head vigorously.

"What else did you say?"

"That was all, wasn't it?" He stared at Rong, his eyes icy needles.

She nodded, gulping.

He bowed slightly, without looking at them, and walked slowly away.

"What did he really say?" Sui Po asked.

"That all spirits are nonsense."

"Crazy boy," Sui Po said, shaking her head. "He hasn't been alive long enough to learn, maybe. Our magistrate denied spirits too; he was old and well-fixed. He didn't need them. Now he's probably hiding somewhere, shaking, while the Taipings rule his district. I bet he's changing his tune now! He's too cowardly to fight the Taipings, and is probably donating heavily to temples for luck." She laughed. Rong disliked its edge.

"Let's go find the rice-pot," Rong said.

Sui Po frowned up at the temple. Women shouted as they lit

its pale walls. Sui Po shivered and seemed to shrink.

"What's wrong?" Rong said.

"Never mind," Sui Po said in a low voice.

"Yes, yes, a blessing!" Hung said, clapping his fine hands. He looked at Rong, then away, when he saw that Rong looked back.

"Tell Chou Hon that Elder Brother is with her brave women. The Manchus should fear; she shouldn't. There is nothing greater than our God's power."

He looked Rong in the eye. His voice had risen.

"Do you think God will let our people, the rightful owners of this land, fail to regain it from foreign imps? Do you?" He pushed his fist against his hand, glaring first at his generals, and then at Rong.

"The pale missionaries recognized me for who I am. The people will regain their wealth; our band of victims will get its ordained rewards. You, too, little girl, will get yours." He pointed at Rong seriously, then smiled. His eyes shone. He looked like a small, happy child.

She smiled at him. The army would win, and all of them would have enough to eat, and lots of land. Maybe she could have a horse! What was God, who upheld them? They prayed to him, as they had to their ancestors, and to fat, gnarled god-idols whose powers no one remembered. Only God had them live rigidly by new rules, such as men and women sleeping apart. His rules weren't Mother's and Grandmother's.

"Do you obey God, little girl?" Hung said, squinting at Rong. She looked down. "Of course," she whispered.

"Do you worship him?"

"I burn gold paper each week, and pray." She stood straighter; she did pray.

"And you worship no one else?"

She didn't want to tell him about the food she buried each morning for any spirits who might need it. "No," she said after a while.

"God hates liars, you know that?" His eyes glistened, and he stepped towards Rong. "Liars burn forever."

She began to sweat. Maybe she'd be punished by God, if not by Hung first. Forever -- through all lives, all time. She imagined it as eternal itching.

Hung was so close that she could smell his heavy perfume.

"You are afraid," he said, nodding gravely. "That is as it should be for a young sister. You will learn."

She nodded.

"The punishment of God is longer and worse than that of any human government. Remember that as you return with my message. With God's help, you will get back to Hou Hon -- remember that you will return only with his help."

He spoke confidently. If Rong saw a Manchu asleep, she'd pull his queue until he screamed; she would show Hung how brave she could be. She remembered the yamen runners who had leered at Mother and began to feel hot.

Rong wanted to fight. God would keep her alive. She bounced through the forest. A few birds screamed.

The Hakkas were shivering in groups around campfires. She shouted Hung's blessing at Chou Hon, who reddened and nodded stiffly. The other Hakkas raised their eyebrows.

"Go, fight," Rong shouted. "God is with us!" Some of the Hakkas began to clap. They crouched around Rong, staring into her eyes, their own eyes widening.

"Yes, the King has told me that he and God bless our army!" Rong felt she could float away, over the battlefield, and watch from a golden chariot.

Grandmother would have said that a female army was a perversion of nature. Mother could not have fought; only the strongest Han women fought with the Hakkas. Few of these had bound feet.

"After we win, there will be marriage again, but no concubinage! Everyone will be a first wife," Chou Hon shouted, raising her fist.

The local women cheered; the Hakkas, who had always been monogamous, made remarks about Han backwardness. Chou Hon glared at them. Had Chou Hon been a concubine, abused by some autocratic first wife? Rong bet she had poisoned the wife. When Chou Hon looked at you, you could feel her eyes about to jump out and grab your throat.

The fighting had moved to the town's wall. Taipings were scaling it with ropes. Some were knocked, like insects, from the

grey stone. They screamed as they fell. The Hakkas shouted boisterously; they were glad the men were advancing. They weren't joining a defeat.

Rong saw the heretic boy jumping behind the lines, carrying ammunition to black-trousered soldiers. They drew their pistols from their sashes and reloaded. Their knives and pistols glistened.

Everywhere Rong saw blood, smoke and colliding bodies. Now that the Taipings were winning, however, the battle no longer was like a tiring day in the fields. It was almost a religious celebration. The men no longer guarded themselves; they stepped out tall and lithe from behind trees, calling their God's name fiercely.

The Manchus retreated towards the town, their shaven heads red. Dead Taipings, their faces twisted and limbs missing, no longer seemed wasted. They were bees killed so that the hive could conquer a new home. They had obviously left their bodies, which lay empty, and everyone knew their spirits would go to Heaven.

No one heard Manchu horses over the noise of battle. The new Manchus were on the Taipings, riding over them, long curved swords flashing. The Hakkas' cries changed. They were cows, pigs at slaughter. Their blood was dark, splashing everywhere as they ran, blinding them. They fell over each other.

"Rong!" she heard a male voice call. Was it Li Fu? She pushed between men, between horses rearing sweatily. Each horse was a God, and when one fell, with a scream of shocked affront,

Rong jumped away, shaking. Someone grabbed her hand. It was the heretic boy. Rong pulled away. "Come with me," he said. "I'm leaving." His eyes were bloodshot, and his hair stuck out. His clothes were rags, and blood sparkled on his upper arm. Rong shook her head, stepping back. "Don't you understand?" He shouted. "I'm going to a safe place!" He stamped his foot. Rong looked around. She could not see Sui Po, only strangers fighting. She nodded. The boy turned and began to push through the ranks again. Rong followed.

The Taiping God was not as strong as the Gods of these monster horses. Or perhaps he had deserted the Taipings and joined the Manchus. Grandmother said Gods like to play jokes on men, to teach them who rules. "You are master, God!" Rong repeated quietly.

The Manchus were fighting the women, too. Rong heard their cries as they were stabbed. "Too ugly to rape!" Rong heard Manchus shout, laughing cuttingly. They scooped up a few Han women in front of them, slashing their wrists, and pulling off their red jackets. Rong was glad Sui Po was not here.

Rong's stomach hurt. It pinched her as she ran, behind the boy. They moved away from the cries and smoke. What would Hung say, when his men died? Perhaps God would descend as a dragon and burn up the Manchus. Rong could still hear men screaming, begging, like children after a nightmare.

God had betrayed them. Rong, who had begun to believe in him solely, had spurred the women to fight. Grandmother was right; believing in one capricious God was stupid. At least if you

worshipped many Gods, they would desert you at different times. Rong would kill God. How could she kill God? What if he were still powerful, and heard her?

III

"Hung's nothing, Rong; forget the Taipings," Yi said, kicking a stone out of his way as he climbed.

"You don't know that, Yi. He amassed all those soldiers, and that huge camp. One defeat is minor in comparison."

"He didn't do it, Rong. The peasants were ready to follow anyone; they were angry, unjustly blaming all their problems on the Manchus."

Rong remembered Hung's eyes that were like those of the priestess.

"It is important to honor the ancestors, of course, but a well-run world doesn't need crackpots and shamans," Yi said. "That's all Hung is, a glorified shaman, pretending to give the orders of the spirit world."

"You're the one who's crazy," Rong said. She thought about Sui Po, the way she walked, spoke and worked quickly and humorously. She wished Sui Po were here. Sui Po was not blind to the reality of spirit power.

"How rude you are." Yi shook his head. "Of course, a peasant. . ." He looked at her and laughed. "I can really be pompous."

"If I were running an army, I'd do it like Tseng Kuo-fan. He teaches each man to be loyal enough to his commander that he would die for him. That is the unity you need. My Taiping supervisor merely threatened; he didn't even know our names! And to break up families! That can't last."

"I agree," Rong said. She thought of Li Fu powerless, and

her cousins unbridled. "But the families were glad to eat, whether separated or not."

"Yes, but once they've been fed, they'll realize how badly they're being treated."

"Maybe you did," Rong said. "No one I knew did. They were excited to have hope, and they deeply believe in the power of the Taiping God to bring victory to them. They are afraid of God, too -- afraid of what will happen to them if they desert; God will know."

"Well, maybe they haven't been fed long enough. Just wait, you'll see I'm right. In the intensity of battle, people forget their grievances. Wait until the Taipings actually set up a settled Kingdom; you could see the beginnings of decay in our camp."

Rong remembered the blood-desire in the eyes of Hakkas as they burned the temple. The Hakkas forgot they hated the Kiangsi women, and vice versa, as they destroyed it together. Satiated, they slept. That night, bickering began again.

Yi's back was bony and strong. Rong distrusted him for a moment; he reminded her of Fui from behind. She looked down the loose, gravelled path. She could hide in that grove a short way down the hill; Yi would not notice she had gone until she was well on the way to a hiding place. She stood straighter; she could leave if need be. "Where are we going, Yi?" she asked, trying to sound nonchalant.

"I told you -- to the Taoist monastery where my brother is." He had shouted. Rong stopped. What was wrong with him? She

wanted to hit him, as she had wanted to hit Fui. It was getting cold, though, and her feet hurt. She needed to eat. What could she catch, alone, without weapons, in a forest? She bit her lips. Yi was like Fui after all.

"Just because I think spiritualism is unnecessary, doesn't mean I won't use a temple for shelter," he said calmly.

"My brother's religion isn't really religion, anyway," Yi continued. "I respect him, as a younger brother should." Why was he making such a big point of the filial respect that anyone would expect from a Confucian like Yi? What difference did it make in this bone-exposing cold? Yi was acting like his pompous self again.

Rong wove between dingy monk's huts. She reached the immense central pagoda, its curved roof a cheerful red against a blue sky. She had never been inside a fine temple before, and entered cautiously. The hall was long and bare, except for scrolls on its walls. The calligraphy on them looked like bird footprints. Rong tossed her head; reading was a waste of effort for a woman, anyway. The pictures on the scrolls were faded but vibrant. She recognized erratic Yangtze gorges. Here, their steepness was accentuated; they chasmed in mist.

"What do you think of the painting, Rong?"

The one-legged monk, Chung Ho, was leaning on his crutch.

"I don't know." She shifted from one foot to the other. Why was the old creep asking her questions? He'd ruined her private

exploration.

"Why is that?"

"I don't know, I said." Rong tried to scare him with a frown.

He smiled. He stood, threadbare and decrepit, against the still fine silk scrolls. How could he make beauty, or understand it? He looked worse than her Father had before the Taipings came.

"Not knowing is a good start, Chuang Tzu says. He once dreamt he was a butterfly, and when he woke he didn't know whether he was a butterfly dreaming he was a man, or a man who'd dreamt he was a butterfly." He laughed, shaking his head.

Rong shrugged. She imagined herself a butterfly in a sun-wet meadow down the mountain. But she wasn't a butterfly; there was a war going, and here he was talking nonsense.

"Who cares?" she said sharply.

"Chuang Tzu cared, but his point was that he shouldn't have. You wouldn't care, I can tell. I hope I wouldn't." His voice trailed off.

Rong looked at him, her eyebrows together. She wanted to tell him she thought he was crazy. Would he kick her out of the monastery? Yi would be angry. But this old man was crazy, and lazy, just thinking all the time. What good did he do anyone? The Taipings would put him to work. The gentry were hood-winked into supporting him.

"Would you like to learn to paint?" Chung Ho asked seriously, looking at her.

She was still staring at the gorges, wishing she were there, in their comfortable wildness. She blushed, because she would

like to paint, but distrusted Chung Ho. Painting would be exciting, not like talking over confusing ideas. She could paint the river seething at noon under the junk she had pulled, or her father's fields fulfilled in spreading growth.

Why would he want to teach her? He was strange. He was looking at the Yangtze gorges, and humming. Perhaps he wanted to curse her through the brush he gave her. The forms she made would fit homeless spirits, who would attack her in her sleep.

"No," she said.

"Really?" he said, sounding surprised. "And you won't steal my paints and brushes when I am asleep?"

Rong blushed.

She heard light voices and laughter, and looked down the hall. A young priest approached, a satin-draped woman on each side, upheld by slender, shining canes. The women glanced at Rong and Chung Ho, then focused impassively on the scrolls. The ladies seemed empty to Rong, next to the defiant motion of the gorges. She wanted to stick her tongue out at them, to awaken them from their disdainful ennui. The Taipings said gentry weren't superior; the two women did not impress Rong. Gentry were usually idle parasites, the Taipings had said.

"Hail, Chung Ho," the young priest said offhandedly. His hair shone in the half-darkness. He had never felt hunger, Rong could see. She hated the leisurely undulations in his voice.

"Ladies, this is Chung Ho, one of our oldest refugees from gentrydom."

"Yes, I was here when your father brought you, Su Fu."

The ladies nodded slightly and Chung Ho mimicked them, looking amused. Perhaps he wasn't the idiot he seemed. Then he seemed to frown at his own response; Rong wondered why.

"Unfortunately our ways to Immortality aren't the same, ladies," Su Fu said, snorting. "Chung Ho relies only on thought, not on the many-pronged method of our ancestors. He neglects diet and exercise." Su Fu shook his head.

Living forever? That was a practical goal; Rong was surprised.

"You misunderstand my aims, Su Fu," Chung Ho said in a low voice. "Come sometime, and we'll talk."

"I am honored, Chung Ho, and regret I misunderstand you, although, because I have studied Philosophical Taoism, I am surprised I could have." He raised his eyebrows. The ladies followed.

What were Chung Ho's aims? Rong was getting impatient; they talked and talked, when she had wanted to explore the pagoda alone. She would go out, down the mountain, until she found a secret place. She could go there if she needed to.

The monks and ladies stood stiffly, even Chung Ho.

"Your brother Yi is here?" Su Fu said nonchalantly. "I'm sure your parents will be overjoyed. I hear he is a young scholar of promise, who will bring honor to his clan." Su Fu's voice rose.

Chung Ho jerked and reddened. Su Fu looked at him through slit eyes.

"The Chuang Tzu talks about men's invented traps," Chung Ho said. "I am falling in, and will leave first. Touché Su Fu!" He laughed raspingly and limped down the hall.

Su Fu half-smiled. Rong wanted to slap him.

"The old man left his wife, family and magisterial position to come here," Su Fu told the ladies in an undertone. "His family had donated to the monastery for years, but when he did that, his father wanted it all back. The monks were in an uproar. He disowned Chung Ho and none of them have come here since, until this young Yi was forced to do so to escape the Taipings."

"What lack of filial piety," the taller lady said.

"He ignored his sacred responsibility to his sons," the other lady said, shaking her head.

So Chung Ho was like her father, a deserter. But Chung Ho wasn't starving when he left his family. He was incomprehensible. She pitied Chung Ho, but was angry at him; she didn't know why.

"How did he come to lose his leg?" asked the taller lady.

"It was his damned un-Taoistic stubbornness," Su Fu said, shaking his head. "For a few months some bandits occupied our temple. They bet that when a Philosophical Taoist was approached violently, he'd run away, like any other man. Hearing this, we Hsien Taoist monks wisely hid. 'Come on, hurry,' I said to Chung Ho, who was reading Lao Tzu. He wouldn't come, idiot. He stared ahead. When the bandits left, we emerged and found Chung Ho in shock, bleeding profusely. To this day he won't talk about it."

Rong cocked her head. Perhaps Chung Ho was bewitched. He wasn't dangerous, however; she could see that. She would let him teach her to paint. Then the quietness here would be more bearable. She would not think of Mother and Sui Po so much, perhaps.

Yi was sitting in the garden, painting a tall, pointed rock. Rong watched him quietly from behind. She would paint too, soon. Look how poorly he copies the rock's form; she wouldn't tell him so, but one day she would show him how to really paint.

"Aw, come on, Rong, don't watch me."

"All right, I won't, and you can find out for yourself what Su Fu said to Chung Ho."

Yi sighed, and continued to paint. Rong waited, looking around. It was spring, and the pond was a jungle of lotus stems.

"What are you trying to do, Yi? That doesn't look like a rock."

"Hsieh Ho said it's important to have a painting look like its model. I agree, but I see more in the subject than a rock. See the dragon's head? It's spitting fire."

Rong followed his finger, but all she saw was cool, uneven grey stone. It made patterns like those on a frog's back.

"Yi, you're crazy too." She shook her head. "Don't you remember what the Taipings said about the new Kingdom coming? And here you are pretending this monastery won't be destroyed, with its dainty ladies and idle priests."

"Rong, we're not with the Taipings anymore." Yi flushed. "We're here. I just went along with them to prevent them from killing me."

"Huh!"

"Yes, that was why. They're not going to win; no revolution has ever succeeded in destroying China's system. Now, if they'd merely try to make Hung the new Emperor, without getting the

gentry and the priests enraged. . . ."

"That's blasphemy!"

"Forget it, Rong. I'm no lover of Su Fu, either, but remember his power here. Those fine ladies support you and me, as well as my brother."

"Today Su Fu took away your brother's face, so don't chide me for cursing him." Rong paced away.

"Really?"

She knew he'd follow her; he did, his lips set tight.

"You didn't care before, when you were posing as scholar-artist, so forget it now," she said.

"I'm sorry. Please. I forget you have Taiping ideas about a woman's priorities; I was raised in a proper home."

"You didn't forget. You just don't care."

Yi reddened as she told him.

"It's all true; it was my brother's fate. He was withering at home, smoking opium and seeking expensive courtesans. He hated his wife; she is a nagger, though pretty, they say. He stuck it out for years because of family pride; I know he should have continued to do so -- don't look shocked. But some men must be priests, or we'd have none. The Chuan Tzu says social and family life are illusions, anyway."

"Why would your family go to a temple that said that? You usually say the opposite."

"Oh, who knows. If you look at eternity, social ties are illusion, but if you look at now, they're all we have to work with."

"Even part of Yi feels Confucian rigidity is false," someone said in a deep voice. "He came here to see what he could learn; I stayed."

Chung Ho stepped through a round hold in the garden wall. He was no evil spirit, Rong now knew for certain; or the hole would have blocked his entry.

Yi blushed, looking at his brother. "Yes, Elder brother," he said quietly, bowing.

"You can forget Confucian manners with me, boy," Chung Ho said, smiling. "Not only does Chuang Tzu say so, but they have bad reverberations for me. And now you wish to paint?" He looked at Rong.

"Yes," she said, looking down.

The brush felt funny in her hand: smooth and cool, but clumsy. That was her mark on the silk! It was a blotch, but one she had made; it had not been there before.

"That curves like a tree is bent in wind," Chung Ho said. "A start without artifice -- good!"

She ignored his jargon, and moved the brush again, warm from his encouragement.

"Teaching a woman to paint is unusual, brother," Yi said slowly. "And Rong, after all, is only a peasant at that."

Rong clutched her brush tightly. She glowered at Yi.

"See, she proves it," Yi added. "Well, I. . ." Yi's voice faded as he saw Chung Ho's hurt expression.

"Go on, Rong," Chung Ho said. She did, shivering slightly. She heard Yi stride off.

She realized she had been lost in painting when she looked up; Chung Ho, too, had gone. She felt strong and light. It wasn't a very good tree, though. Not as good as it had seemed while she painted it. Perhaps she should hide it; Yi would laugh and Chung Ho might think she was too stupid to continue. He wouldn't say so, but she would know.

"That's not a bad painting, Rong," Yi said.

"Of course it's not. Go fix your hair. It's sticking out, like it used to when you were a Taiping."

"Leave it to you to notice unimportant details." His voice trailed off, and he shifted his feet.

She laughed.

He stood still and frowned, his eyebrows sticking out more than the rest of his hair.

"We've known each other for two years, and you still haven't learned to be polite to me, even though I rescued you from the Taipings." Yi sniffed and shook his head, then smiled. "I'm only teasing."

But Rong's shoulders were already hunched. He never remembered that she missed Sui Po, that she worried about her, that she felt almost filial shame for leaving her, while feeling confusion and embarrassment about helping the Taipings. First she had left Mother and Grandmother, and then Sui Po, and who knows but what she had helped drive Father away. Yi was looking at her strangely, with his eyes wet and large. She looked away quickly, and so did he.

"Sometimes you're like Lin Dai-yu, the melancholy heroine," Yi said softly. "You strike out skillfully, so people will leave you alone. And you hide the reason for your sadness, while flaunting its effect. But you're not weak, like Dai-yu; you're strong. You'll live a long life, and with your shrewdness, run everyone in it." He smiled slightly. "I hate to be run."

Rong shrugged. Was he insulting her? He knew she could not read well enough to understand his allusion to Lin Dai-yu.

Rong hated to think of herself as tough and bossy, like Sui Po or Grandmother, although she loved them. She looked down at her strong, wide hips and sighed. Why wasn't she wispy, like Mother? Instead she had Grandmother's flat face and mannish build. Under the covers, she had felt her face, and knew the clumsy contours of it. Perhaps her ugliness and tendency to blurt out the inappropriate were why Chung Ho called for her less and less, these days. She would have to change, become passive and polite, like Mother.

"You don't listen to me, Rong," Yi said. "I compliment you and you misinterpret it."

"That was a compliment?"

"Maybe when I'm gone you'll appreciate me better."

"And you're still planning to go to the war, on the Manchu side?"

"Of course. It's my duty." He raised his head.

"A convenient excuse," she said, smiling. Yi could never be content with peace.

"It's no excuse," Yi said. "All my ancestors have led when rebels came. Since I was forced to be on the rebel side, I have a

greater reason to kill them. And, I know their ways; I'd be useful to the Confucian generals."

"We both know their ways." Yi acted as though she had never been out of the monastery.

He shrugged. His mouth gathered and he frowned.

Rong knew he was recalling the temple-burning, and the priest's cries. She blushed. Well, she had been a part of that. It was too late to change it, however much Taoist books made her regret her participation in collective violence.

"We don't need more killing," Rong said slowly. "Chung Ho won't like you going."

Yi began to pace. "I know it, but it's the right balance of Yin and Yang that I go. I can feel it. Too long I've been sitting here, stewing over the Taipings and over my family's past. Taoism is for when there's no hope."

"Is that so?" Rong shook her head.

"You're a woman, so of course action's no issue for you. But duty should be. When you marry, you must expiate your parents' joint shame, which is your own shame. You must regain face for your ancestors, as I must."

"Stop preaching at me. I know what I must do; you're no wiser than I." Her stomach tightened as she thought of Mother, of Father, of Grandmother, of Sui Po. Who knew what had happened to them? And Yi had made her feel worse; he always did, from the first time he had asked her about her past. He had shaken his head and explained that although her family's tragedies had been fate, it was her shame; she should have stayed with her Mother,

somehow. She again heard Grandmother telling her about the duties of daughter to parents as they sat making shoes in winter. And she had believed the Taipings; she had wanted to believe that family didn't matter, that only loyalty to the Taiping army counted. Now Chung Ho told her that shame was a way the Confucians controlled. She didn't believe him, for he felt shame too, she could tell. He spoke of his family in a tight voice, then looked away. No, shame was no Confucian invention, but part of human souls.

"Of course you won't listen to me," Yi said. "I should know better by now." He sighed loudly.

His old self-righteousness back again. He never seemed to doubt himself; the Taipings hadn't affected him at all, except to make him more himself than ever. She envied his certainty; his certainty made her want to attack him.

"I don't know why you resist my advice. I'm like a brother to you. And you will marry; what else can you do? Be a mystic nun? That doesn't suit you. I wonder who you will marry." His voice trailed off.

Did he know it must be Chung Ho she would marry, or no one? He would realize he loved her; he must. Why else would he have helped her learn to paint? Yes, he cared for her; she could hear the caring in his voice. And no one cared for him, understood him, more than she.

"You're pale," Yi said softly. "Are you all right?" his hand patted her back and his eyes were large and intense. She shrugged and he stepped back. She frowned. What was wrong with him? He

looked awkward; his skinny arms hung stiffly and his chin jutted out, red. He was like a woman to her: vulnerable, impulsive and petty; who could tell that he and Chung Ho, who was wise, and tender, were brothers?

"Good bye, then," he said huskily. "I don't suppose you'll still be here when I return." His voice rose.

Of course she would be here. He was making a lot out of nothing; he'd have his adventures and come back soon, satiated, and ready to find something else new to try.

He looked at her seriously. She stopped daydreaming. He did care for her. She shifted her feet. She had never wanted this from Yi.

"May your fate be good, as you deserve," he said, looking down. He grabbed her hand and squeezed it, then strode off, his shoulders up, the way Yi always moved. Her hand tingled awhile. With her head sideways, she smiled, then shook her head. Odd that Yi did appreciate her; she couldn't be completely unattractive. Oh, it was immodest to think about it. Why didn't Chung Ho make the overtures he should? He must know she loved him. He merely looked away.

Rong shook as Chan handed her a bowl of gruel. Light blaring through the doorway splattered the gruel and Rong looked up, her head spun on the splatterings. All was black, except for the sparks. The bowl crunched onto the table and Rong jumped. She held the table edge to steady herself.

"Look what a mess you've made," growled Chan. "Why Master Yi ever brought you here, I can't guess, peasant scum." Chan shook his head.

Chan's bald head was growing and shrinking. She batted her eyes at the stabbing colors of the room. Every time she opened them, things had moved, and changed shape. She gripped the table harder.

"Can't you see she's ill, Chan?" Chung Ho had turned from the fire, where he had been warming his hands.

"Rebuild the fire under my kang and take her there, Chan," Chung Ho said. "The kang should still be warm enough for you to get into it now, Rong, if you like." He looked at her, his eyebrows up. "No one will bother you."

Chung Ho had offered her his kang, the finest one she had ever seen! She imagined herself deep within its soft warmth. No one would be able to see her.

Chan grunted and grabbed her elbow. "The old man's daft," he said under his breath, shaking his head. "Next, he'll be taking a concubine to really fill his bed."

They had reached Chung Ho's small, stark room. The magnificently sturdy kang stood in the center, dominating this small, bare space. It felt as she had hoped, safe and dark and deep.

"Making the master stay out of his own room!" mumbled Chan.

"Chung Ho won't be needing this room, will he?" Rong sat up.

"He will tonight."

Rong dreamt that a man with long Taiping hair, wearing Manchu robes, came up behind Mother while she was cooking over the fire

at home. He raised his long knife and his mouth curled open, the teeth protruding like knives. Rong screamed, but she was outside the room, somewhere in blackness, watching. Mother hummed and stirred the soup, not noticing the man's breath on her neck. The knife whistled through the air and Rong awoke, feeling as she had when they first arrived at the monastery.

She lay as still as she could, feeling herself breathe; how dependable it felt, and how good the sheets, resting lightly over her. She dreamt and woke, dreamt and woke. She could not remember her dreams completely, just fragments of scenes. There was Sui Po, begging on a dusty road; Father, being flogged by the fat magistrate; the priestess, her eyes bloodshot and huge, laughing harshly, and slapping her legs. Always Rong watched, but could not speak or act. She tried to dream of the marsh, but could not. The spectres were relentless; they would not leave her. She tossed.

When Chan brought her tea she tasted again the tangy cups Mother had brought her the last time she had been bedridden, years ago when her feet had been bound. She had felt like shattering those cups and dragging the pieces over Mother's face. Her stomach tightened and she clenched her fists. She thought of Mother and the tears came, scratching her cheeks. Spirits with long green fingernails asked her how she, a good daughter, could have been so petty as to hold what Mother could not help against her, and let her die. She would pay for her shame. She would yowl, like a ghostie, into the wind. Only the tortured would hear her, and they would plug their ears, their bloodshot eyes expanding.

The spirits would not leave her, no matter how violently she tossed.

Chung Ho was a dream of brightness, kindness, and she repeated his name silently. She could believe he had befriended her in the sunlight, when the room was filled only by soft peace. But at night, the spirits came back, and she could not believe in his existence anymore. It was only she and they, and the empty dark.

The air buzzed, thick and fragrant. Her arms and legs sunk heavily into the kang. Her breath rose regularly above her. Her throat itched. Time wouldn't move. She sat up and craned her neck to see out the doorway. No sounds, no shapes. She wondered why Chung Ho had let her stay in his room all this time; it must have been days!

"Hello, Rong," Chung Ho said. Had he known she was thinking of him? She had not heard his crutches on the dirt floor. His long, white hair looked thick and healthy today, and his eyes sparkled. He seemed young inside, as young as she. She could imagine the shining young man he had been. She sat up very straight.

"You're looking better," he said, nodding. "Being ill can be a good thing, sometimes." He looked down.

Rong cocked her head. How did he know of her dreams? Perhaps Chan had seen her tossing and told him?

"Would you pour us some tea?" he said. "Suppose you paint

some, today. Would you like that?"

"Why, yes," Rong said, standing carefully. She spilled some tea on the tray. There was nothing to wipe it up with. She blushed.

"It doesn't matter," Chung Ho said, putting out his hand. She gave him the small blue cup. She brushed his hand as she did, and shrunk back, redder.

"What did the Taipings lead you to expect?" He sipped his tea slowly, looking at her.

She didn't want to remember them; in this peace, their exultant killing seemed insane. It hadn't at the time, though. "That I'd kill for God," she said slowly.

His eyebrows rose and he nodded. "And your family, we know they trained you to become a proper peasant wife."

She shrugged.

He laughed. "I don't care what you do or become. Lao Tzu would say Confucians hide under many cloaks, including those of religious fanatics. That is why I question you; it's just curiosity, to substantiate hunches. Are you hungry?"

"Yes."

"I'll tell Chan to bring you food and paints and brushes." He stood slowly. He raised himself smoothly; Rong noted the muscular hardness of his leg and arms under his rough cotton robe. He moved over his crutches gracefully; the spirits in their wood must be his friends. He stopped and turned, near the door.

"You look spent and regretful," he said. "That makes sense. When the bandits came and took my leg, I was quiet and passive, as

a Taoist should be. Inside, though, I stabbed them, and heard them cry with greater pain than I really felt. I went into a fever, like you. I saw my Father, a censor, crying at his desk because I had left, disgracing the ancestors. Mostly, he cried because he loved me. And what had I left to avoid, but to feel?" He shook his head and smiled painfully, and began to walk.

Rong smiled back. She did not want to tell him she didn't understand. She did feel, though, that he knew her pain better than she; he could name it, while all she could do was feel it. Chung Ho amazed her.

The gruel Chan brought soothed her throat and rested just right on her tongue. It was still hot. She savored the contrast between the harsh tea and the gruel's sweetness. She imagined Chung Ho standing before her again and smiled. Sui Po and Mother had cared for her, but Chung Ho knew her. She seemed more mystified by herself than Chung Ho did.

Chan had left the paints, frowning and shaking his head. She picked up a brush and plunged it in ink. It shone wet, and she raised it. But the clean silk was beautiful, with its own tiny lines shifting in delicate patterns like those she wanted to draw. The ink had dried and she soaked the brush again, smiling at the way the ink welled and twinkled.

This time her splashes were undisciplined yet definite, not timid, as before. As she stared at them, she felt the connections between them, although she could not say what they meant. The landscape swelled, its mountains like waves, with energy both dark and joyous in swirls and peaks. The fragments of her dreams fit

mysteriously, finally, in a resisting dance of dark and light.

Rong woke, and sunlight made her close her eyes again. She smiled, and sprang up. She would see Chung Ho this morning. She would show him her latest painting, and they would discuss Chuang Tzu, whom she had been reading. The painting looked tidy, rolled up. Rong looked around her tiny room, pleased at its clean whiteness. She picked up her clothes from the table where she always put them, and unfolded them slowly. They smelled fresh, and the cotton wadding in her jacket puffed stiffly, as it always did right after she had washed it. She felt a tiny hole in it. She pulled the thread down from the unfinished, dustless shelf above her head. She leaned over her mending, humming.

"You look like an old midwife, with her legs apart," said Chan, twitching his long moustache. He peered around the doorway.

Rong shrugged and smiled, and continued mending. Chan liked her better now; he had once told her he liked people who kept their rooms clean, looking significantly at Yi, who didn't.

"Well, just work through breakfast, and see if I care!" Chan laughed and shook his head. "You don't have to start at sun-up! I know well enough that you don't stop for darkness. I saw the lamp burning in here last night when I went to bed. I thought of telling you to go to bed, but I knew it would do no good." He laughed. "Literary ladies don't obey mere servants! Why it's only the master they'll fetch and carry for." He winked at her.

She blushed and he smiled. She kept her eyes focused on the

cloth, but her hands would not stay controlled.

"Don't worry, I'm not about to go telling tales, especially about young ladies I like," Chan said.

Rong raised her eyebrows. "There's nothing to tell," she said flatly.

"I know it, unfortunately," he said. "But you never know when there will be something to tell!" He whistled. "I'm off to eat, silly maiden."

Rong nodded. She could work again, now. It felt good to be calm, good to see the cloth become almost perfect again. Anyway, the mending made it even more her jacket. The bump where she had sewn was smooth under her finger. She put on the jacket, straightening it. She would see Chung Ho today! Then she carefully disarrayed the jacket a bit. She did not want him to think she dressed especially for him. He would think that artificial.

She walked down the narrow hallway. Chan kept it very clean. Sometimes she helped him, although her duty was to make and repair robes for the monks. She sewed from midday to supper. Pui Bao, the young woman with a peaked chin, had taught her, giggling. Rong had been too new, too resentful, to laugh with Pui Bao. She had thought Pui Bao was laughing at her; when she'd known her better, she realized she hadn't been. Two months ago Pui Bao had been sold to a patron who fancied her. Pui Bao had laughed lightly when Rong asked her whether she wanted to go. "Of course," she said. "Who will take care of me if I grow old here? What face will I have without children?"

"But you'll only be a concubine," Rong had said. "What if

his wife is mean to you? And he's so fat, and wrinkled."

Pui Bao had just shrugged and laughed louder. "You'll go too," Pui Bao had said. "They won't let you grow old here when they can make a profit off you when you're young."

"I'll never leave," Rong had said. "I'd drown myself first."

"We'll see," Pui Bao had said, shaking her head. Rong had bitten her lips.

"I know why you don't want to leave," Pui Bao had said.

"Never mind," Rong had answered quickly. Pui Bao had widened her eyes. Was it that obvious? And Chan knew, too, from what he had said today. Chung Ho must know. Why didn't he speak? Perhaps he didn't wish to? No, it couldn't be that. He cared for her.

Chan's gnarled wife served gruel at the long table. The servants stood around it, talking of the weather and their work for the day as they ate. Chung Ho huddled by the fire, as usual. Since his leg was cut off, he needed warmth all the time, he said. He was the only monk to eat breakfast with the servants. The others ate with gentry-guests from outside, or alone, meditatively, in the garden or in their cells.

Chung Ho liked to eat alone, so Rong stood across the room, watching his back, hoping no one noticed her. She felt hot and cold by turns, as she always did with him, unless they were immersed in some subject that distracted her from him. When he rose she turned away, chewing rapidly.

"Rong," he said. She faced him, knowing she was blushing, and he beckoned her. She followed him to his study. Her legs

seemed stiff; she was conscious of each movement, although he could not see her. Her head, body, tingled.

"Are you going to show me a new painting?" Chung Ho smiled.

"Oh, yes, I forgot it," Rong said, shifting from one foot to the other. She looked at him. His eyes were shining, humorous; she looked down. She dared not let him see her eyes. She walked out quickly. The hall was cold and long, like the inside of a snake. Rong's stomach hurt, and she slowed her usual fast walk.

The scroll felt strong and secure in her hand. She walked straighter. The hall was warming up as the sun got stronger.

She raised her eybrows at Chung Ho, holding out the scroll. He nodded. She unrolled it carefully.

"Yes," he said. "You have captured the Tao in those mountains this time."

Rong felt lightened. She smiled and blushed simultaneously, turning half away, he shoulders hunched. She realized she didn't think about her shame anymore; nor did she dream of ghosts and grisly images of Father, Mother and Sui Po. The nightmares had gone away sometime since Yi left, and it no longer hurt to think of her family members' names. It had taken until now to realize she had changed.

"This is a fighting harmony," Chung Ho added in a low voice. "I see Mi Fei in the looseness of form, in the cynamism of shapes. Good. The mountains move, breathe, fight. Chuang Tzu has led you well, to yourself." Chung Ho beamed. "This is truly a fine work. When Yi brought you here, I could see you might someday be able to paint like this, but I was never sure until now."

He looked at her. She fought watery eyes.

"I wanted to tell you that I leave tomorrow," Chung Ho said, stiffly. "My father is dying. Yi will be there, too, come back from the war."

Rong wanted to shout: "What do I care whether Yi returns?" She only nodded. Of course Chung Ho had not consulted her about leaving; why should he? She was not his kin, or a male friend. He did not invite her to go with him; it would be improper for a young girl to travel with him at this serious time.

"Chan will want you to stay here, although I am gone." Chung Ho blinked. "If you wish, of course. Continue painting. I will want to see your new work someday."

"Someday?"

"I don't know when and if I'll be coming back. There's a Confucian side to me, too. I love my father." He shrugged and looked down.

After he left, Rong sat down. She could not move or think. She looked at the fine silk, ready for her paints, and felt the impulse to rip it pass through her, and leave her cynical. She clenched her fists, and pounded them into her lap.

IV

Inside the sedan chair, Rong sneezed at dust which somehow infiltrated the heavy red curtains. Her stomach hurt; she had not been allowed to eat for three days. The chair swayed up and down, up and down, and Rong's head bobbed in its heavy head-dress. Expensive powder made her face stiff; she felt masked. Maybe Chung Ho was out in the street, looking at her chair, wondering what she felt. He would know. Perhaps he was shaking his head, or shrugging. He had other things to think of than her happiness. Perhaps he really believed she would love Yi someday? He knew that Yi would care for her, and perhaps that was all he though she could hope for from marriage. Before she had met Chung Ho, she would have agreed. But she wished he had let her stay with him as a maid or secretary, to be near him as he worked and thought. She would not have pushed him.

She had not seen Yi since he left the monastery years ago. Would he still be scraggly, bony, self-righteous and humourous? She shivered. Why hadn't she drowned herself in a well, like so many other reluctant concubines? Suicide had been her only alternative; she had no money to buy herself into a nunnery. Her hands began to sweat. She knew now how Chung Ho had felt when he realized he was afraid of the bandits with long knives; it was too late to escape. She bowed her head. She might as well hide under powder, for she had no face, no courage to die to preserve her love's purity.

They shook the rattles harder now, and wailed louder. That would keep the spirits who ate prosperity away. Rong shook her

head; she felt not lucky, but accursed. At least perhaps she would see Chung Ho sometimes, as his younger brother's concubine. Maybe if she had a child he would look like his uncle, not his father. If the child were a girl Rong would pity her, and if she could get her to do it, she would make the girl a Buddhist nun, to preserve some of her freedom.

Rong heard a whirring creak. It must be the outer gate of Chung Ho's family compound. If only she were going to a court as Chung Ho's, not Yi's, conclubine. Perhaps she would meet Chung Ho's mother, who, now his father had died, would be the venerated old one; would she be crusty and mean to her daughters-in-law, like Grandmother? Rong squirmed. She was afraid to be set down; she wished the ride would last forever. She could hear the women of the compound shouting; they had not been allowed out to escort her, but now were gustily participating in the protection-rite. Was Yi's first wife out there? Was she planning to torment Rong? The wife would see that Rong had no interest in Yi; Rong would be glad if he spent all his nights with the first wife. Chou Hon had promised the end of concubinage, but the Taipings had lost. Why did Yi want her, anyway? Probably his old pride, and stubbornness. His wife was perfectly educated, a fine poetess and real lady, Rong had heard; he had always abhorred Rong's origins. Well, if he wanted to be superior and humiliate her she would ignore him, until he sent her away. Maybe he fancied he could make her into a lady, the conceited fool. Chung Ho had already taught her what was important: to paint and not to interfere with others. She smiled twistedly, realizing she had not learnt the last thing yet.

She felt the coolies put her down gently, and heard a door creak; this must be her court. The drapes opened. A thin young girl with a frightened smile extended her hand to Rong.

"I'm Hui Pui, your maid," the girl said, looking down. She couldn't be older than thirteen. Rong remembered herself at that age, and felt regretful at the girl's fresh skin. Perhaps the girl could stay with her always, and would not be sold to some gentry as a chamber-wife. Rong bit her lips, for although Yi was young and rich and just, she did not want him; he might as well be old and cantankerous.

Rong looked up. The house was small, but newly painted. Flowers bloomed in front, and Rong could see a tiny rock garden with a burbling water-fall around the corner of the house. At least Yi wasn't stingy; of course, he was a rich man, and this little house was probably nothing to him.

"We're near the main garden," Hui Pui said eagerly. She pointed behind the sedan chair. Rong turned and saw the garden's high, white walls. There was a moon-gate, not more than fifty feet away, framing peonies and a sharp, tall rock. The summer sky was very blue and still, glancing off the clean walls. Rong wanted to go to the garden and sit with Hui Pui. But there was Yi to face. She stiffened and looked around her. The magnificent court nearby must be the first wife's. Its bright red beams shone happily under a sleek, black curved roof. A patio stretched around it, dense with potted plants and carefully cultured miniature trees.

Rong looked at her own small house; yes, she was a high-class servant indeed, and that was all. She blushed.

"Will you come in?" Hui Pui's voice was high, and her extended hand shook.

Rong nodded seriously, folding her hands carefully, as she had been taught, over the red silk gown which delighted her skin. Hui Pui quickly put her hand by her side, looking embarrassed. Rong knew it must be Hui Pui's first time conducting a concubine to her new home.

They walked slowly through the pleasant, cool verandah, where a few chairs and tables stood in precise asymmetry. Plants shone healthily. They passed the tiny, neat maid's chamber. Rong savored the smoothness of the polished wood floor under her satin slippers. She had never been in so fine a place; surely, she could not live here? She was pretending. The house would evaporate in a moment and she would be huddled on a cold field with her cousins again.

Entering the large room she knew was her own, she held her breath. But the kang, covered in blue and gold brocade, was empty. She released her breath.

"Should I bring you tea, mistress?" Hui Pui said.

Rong started. "Why, yes." Hui Pui slipped out. The room seemed cool and cavernous; it was not sunlit, like the maid's. It seemed formally on display. Except for the kang, a heavy table and two chairs, it was empty. It felt like a temple. Rong rubbed her finger over the table. No dust. She liked that, but as she paced, she felt the room resist her attempts to settle into it.

She could not relax here.

"The master wishes to take tea with you," Hui Pui said, putting down the tray with a bump. Rong looked at Hui Pui intently, and Hui Pui rushed out. Rong began to pace again.

"Hello, Rong," said a high but not boyish voice. Rong knew it must be Yi, though he sounded different than she remembered. She was afraid to turn towards him.

She heard him pouring tea. She was expected to pour, but she could not move.

"Here," he said. Rong saw his hand holding the teacup, shaking a little. He was afraid, too. She looked up his arm, struck by its new strong curves, under bright green silk. She took the cup, and sipped once, before looking at his face. He had the old Yi's definite chin and wide-set eyes, but his hair was straight and luxuriant, and his skin was clear and taut over the fine bones of his face. He shifted legs, not awkwardly, as he once had, but self-confidently, smoothly. His body had become hard, but was no longer angular. He was taller than she remembered. Her eyebrows raised. If she had seen him through the compound gate, she would have considered him handsome, with his vigorous, disciplined bearing.

"You've grown even prettier, Rong," he said quietly.

She turned slightly away. She felt stocky and common under these splendid clothes; he must still see those things in her. She did not want to be with him alone; she did not want to soften towards him. She wanted Chung Ho's child, not his. She bit her lips, and wished again she had killed herself. Being here was her fate, the payment for the family shame she thought she had ceased

to believe in. There was no way out, and that was all. She knew now why Mother had that defeated look in her eyes, and in the way she held her shoulders. If only Sui Po were here, they could bind Yi and escape.

"Won't you speak?" Yi said, a little petulantly, with hands on his hips.

Rong glared at him.

He reddened. "I'd hoped your feelings would change, after all these years," he said, his head lowered. "In any case, we will have sons." He looked her in the eyes. "I can see you in them, your strength, your sensitivity to nature, your beauty." His voice trailed off.

Still the same Confucian certainty. He had adopted the notion of wanting her years ago, and nurtured it, as she had her love for Chung Ho. She could not blame Yi; she would have forced Chung Ho to marry her if she could.

He took her teacup and put it on the table. He looked into her eyes with his large, wet ones. She looked away. But she felt a little stirred; his eyes were no longer absurd, but deeply moving.

Yi took her hand. He stroked it. She knew he must be able to feel it was cold and damp.

He led her to the kang. She stood before it, her head down, and he undressed her gently. She looked around the large room; the kang seemed the only soft, safe place. She could feel his eyes, but would not look at him. She felt it was someone else's

body he was looking at. She was floating outside herself, a shivering spirit lost in the large room. He leaned to kiss her breast. She looked at him incredulously. His hair looked soft and young. She felt tender towards him, and tried to remember she did not wish to be here. She was glad he did not try to kiss her mouth. His touches were soft and tingling, not hard enough to be real; she felt she was dreaming.

He entered her slowly. She felt like crying out, but bit her lips. Red waves washed her, and her hot head swelled and shrunk, again and again. She now knew how dogs felt in the sweaty intensity of mating. Yi's eyes were closed, and he clutched her shoulders. His body was soft over hers, like a woman's. The pain made her realize she was actually there. She tried to imagine it was Chung Ho, not Yi, who prodded her. Her tenderness for Yi had left as soon as he stopped kissing her breasts. He was just a man. Her love for Chung Ho was far beyond Yi's for her. Yi was in his own world; she could be anyone, as far as he was concerned. At least she would get sons from this experience; it did not matter that they were Yi's.

Yi was breathing heavily. He shivered and cried out. Rong craned her neck to see him, amazed. He lay, light and quiet, over her. She felt stronger than he again, and relaxed. After a while, he stroked her hair.

He kissed her cheek and rose, sliding quickly into his embroidered robe. How quickly his military manner had returned. Rong turned over, away from him.

"I'll tell Hui Pui to bring your supper," he said. "Later, we'll present you to Mother and to Tu Fei, my wife." He bowed to

her, and strode out.

Relieved, Rong enjoyed the stillness of the room. She touched herself, and flinched at the soreness. She shrugged, and stood up slowly. She washed herself. She looked around again, at the high ceiling and disarrayed kang. Dinner had never been brought to her before. So this was her new life; she remembered Mother's tear-stained face after Father had beaten her, her own hunger on the road, and Sui Po's wild expression as she threw rocks at the priest. She looked out her window at the garden, where brilliant leaves swung violently. The lake rippled in the wind. She breathed deeply. She could have done much worse; Chung Ho was right about that. Yi would treat her well; her sons would inherit money, position and good looks. They would be well-educated, and she would be honored in her old age. She hoped she was with child already, so Yi would not have to return. It hurt too much. She had felt the way she did when her feet were bound.

Rong minced down the great hall, her hand lightly on Yi's arm. She was still sore; it hurt to walk.

Yi's mother sat on a dais, fanned by an old woman in purple satin.

Rong bowed low. So did Yi. She stood to the old woman's alert eyes boring into her. The old woman's head was thrown back. Her features were hawklike, definite. Although her skin was loose, her face looked young, because of her eyes. So this was Chung Ho's mother. Rong guessed she was a brilliant scholar. How she must have reacted when Chung Ho let down the family and withdrew! Rong wondered if she had forgiven him. She looked the kind of woman who would never forget; who might think she had forgiven, but who would have her revenge in subtle ways.

"Welcome, young lady," the old woman said, her voice resonant and masculine in the large hall. "Chung Ho has praised your painting. It is not often we get a concubine with education and talent."

Rong blushed. At least Chung Ho remembered her.

"Call Yi's wife," the old woman said loudly to the woman fanning her. The fanner's expression changed several times, and she bowed anxiously. She walked down the hall faster than Rong thought an old woman could walk.

"Yi tells me you are orderly and efficient, and a fine seamstress."

Rong bowed. "The compliments to me are kind but exaggerated," she said softly, as she should. She remembered the gift of meeting she had brought, and felt within her sleeve.

"Although my sewing is faulty, I hope you will accept this shoddy token of my veneration for you," Rong said evenly, bowing. She handed the old lady a white satin sash with gold dragons embroidered on it. It had taken her hours to make. Chung Ho had sent her the material and thread, with instructions she had reluctantly carried out. She had forgotten how delicate and ethereal the sash was. She had enjoyed making it; it was the softest material she had ever worked with, and she had almost forgotten who it was for.

The old lady smiled widely. How greedy she is, Rong thought.

"Thank you, my child," said the old lady in a business-like voice. "And here is your gift." A servant moved forward, handing Rong a jewel-encrusted brocade purse. Rong's eyebrows rose. It must be worth a fortune. But it was not really hers; the old lady could confiscate it or anything of Rong's anytime. Rong lowered her head.

Rong heard swishing behind her, and turned to see a slender lady mincing forward on her canes. She must be the first wife.

Rong bowed again. She was getting tired of bowing.

Tu Fei, the first wife, bowed back gracefully, her head hanging lightly from her incredibly white neck. She smiled, her eyes brightening as she looked at Rong.

Perhaps we'll be friends, Rong thought. She stood straighter. Yi smiled at each of them. Rong could tell he would like them to be friends. Perhaps he didn't want her merely as a high-class servant after all. She looked at him questioningly.

"Well, Mother, we'd better be off to present ourselves to the ancestors," Yi said matter-of-factly.

Rong wondered whether Yi's ancestors would care that she had come. Would they look at her doubtingly, because of her low birth and mangled feet?

Tu Fei bowed to Rong. What a great compliment! The first wife usually waited for the concubine to bow first. Yi gave Rong his right arm, and Tu Fei his left. They walked out decorously. Rong sneaked a look at Yi's handsome profile. Tu Fei's was even finer. Rong felt awkward next to them, but proud that they wished to walk with her. For the first time here she felt like smiling, although she knew she shouldn't, from respect.

Moonlight streaked the lake. Rong shivered inside her jacket; satin was not as warm as the cotton padding she had once worn. She felt her jade hairpin and the smooth bun underneath it; Tu Fei's maid from Soochow had fixed her hair well.

"Stop primping, Rong, and join us," Tu Fei called from the boat. We will have all the wine drunk before you get to it." She downed a cup, then flung another cup in the water in Rong's direction. "That will tempt her."

Yi laughed, squeezed Tu Fei quickly, then stepped over the collapsible bridge to Rong. He extended his hand.

"My beautiful concubine and our child are welcome at this grand occasion." He smiled, and Rong smiled back.

She stepped carefully over the bridge, feeling the funny extra weight of the baby inside her. The bridge creaked and undulated. She did not want to fall in; all her dignity as the future

mother of an only son would be gone. She looked up at Tu Fei, who watched her intently. She felt guilty for thinking herself better than Tu Fei, the mother of a mere girl. Her child might be a girl; anyway, it would be hard enough for Tu Fei if it were a son, without her being unkind about it. Tu Fei had come to her court late one night, and cried over her lap. Tu Fei had not been pregnant in two years.

Tu Fei helped Rong up the short ladder to the junk. Its sails curved over them gracefully, securely. Rong heard gibbons crying from nearby trees and felt warm and light.

Tu Fei handed her a cup of hot, fragrant wine. They had brought their own stove and left the servants at home. Only the boatman was there, tall and dour, watching the water. Rong thought he stood like a rigid Taiping; perhaps he had been one once, and now worked for a class he hated. She wished he were not with them; she felt like an actress, with him there.

Yi tickled her. She knew her laugh sounded affected, and regretted it. She wished she could send the boatman home.

"Come, relax, Rong," Yi said. "We will invent poems more fanciful than Chu Huan's to describe this precious night." His brows knit delicately, like bird's wings, as he looked at her. She almost loved him; this surprised her. It was his taut fineness.

He began:

"Silky is the moon-goddess' touch on our eyelids.
Our eyes close to hold her.
She dances on water with us.
So old men dream."

Yi's voice cracked as he finished his poem. "This is no dream," he added, laughing.

Tu Fei hugged him. Her eyes looked wet. Rong loved her, her quick warmth. Yi could be melodramatic at times, but then, his father had died recently. He dwelled on it, imagining his own death. Rong knew that often one's portents are accurate, and that admitting the possibility of disaster could bring it on. She wished he wouldn't; he was young, still, waiting for his first son. She couldn't help remembering the poet Tu Fu's lines: "Our floating life is but a dream; how many times can one enjoy oneself?"

She had enjoyed herself so much lately; it was like the time at the monastery when she had waited to pay for happiness. She hadn't yet, really. Always floating, displaced, she arrived at safe ports. Tu Fei and Yi had always lived safely, comfortably, but even they felt unease; Yi remembered his time with the Taipings and his father's death, and Tu Fei dwelled on her inability to conceive.

"I brought you a surprise," Tu Fei said. "A garden for us to build."

"Ah, wonderful," Yi said.

Rong cocked her head; this was a new game.

Tu Fei pulled out a small chest from under her seat. She sifted blue, green and pink rocks through her slender hands. A row of tiny plants in various shapes stood nearby. She unwrapped a large, ballooning glass. "Here is our world," she said, smiling.

Yi knelt beside her, staring at the plants intently. He stroked his tiny beard. Rong was glad that he and Tu Fei were absorbed. They would be happy now, for a while. They had been so kind to her, always waiting for her to learn, to adjust; not pushing, but helping tactfully. She wanted to guard their peace.

The boatman stood guard. She didn't trust him. But what could she do? Yi laughed. He had told her this morning about the missionaries. Yi gave money to men who put up the anti-foreign propaganda; he said the foreigners would destroy tenancy and gentry leadership. She saw her Father's face sweating over fields that were no longer his. But Chung Ho would once have told her to live her own life as it was, and not to interfere; society was corrupt by nature. And there it was; the new Confucian society had not really reformed things, and now the warlords ravaged their frightened tenants' lands. Bandits, who were displaced tenants, robbed the peasants who held on. Yi and Tu Fei did not worry about fairness; they were right, one's place was one's place and that was all. Chung Ho and Mother said so, too. Rong would be a mother in an honourable house; Mother would be proud in the spirit-world. Rong glorified her, as she should. While with the Taipings she had learnt to enjoy obedience. She had no choices now, really; why did she persist in thinking about her life? The Taipings had said family was second to state and God. They had failed, but she was in her own family-centered Heaven. She touched Tu Fei's soft hair with wonder.

"Early evening is my favorite time," said Tu Fei. "Listen, Rong."

"To what?" Rong looked at Tu Fei, enjoying, as usual, her tiny features and luxuriant, perfectly coiled hair.

"The birds. . .they all talk now."

Rong looked up into the trees lining the twisting garden path. "I don't see them," she said. "Where are they?"

"They're secretive, aren't they?" said Tu Fei. "I wonder what they are saying to each other. Rong! What is it?"

Rong had bent over as far as she could. The baby was beating her from within. Her lower body clenched. She stifled a cry; it would not be seemly to scream.

"Is it time, Rong?" Tu Fei's voice was high.

Rong shrugged. She saw Tu Fei's eyes widen. Tu Fei seemed dishevelled, although she could not be. Tu Fei stood on her toes, facing Rong, rubbing her hands together. She had had one daughter; a difficult birth, Rong had heard. Tu Fei was too narrow, the doctors said. Rong was surprised that Tu Fei had survived the birth. Did she look fearful because she worried about Rong? Or in memory of her own pain? Perhaps she wanted Rong's son to die, since it was unlikely that Tu Fei could have more children, and if Rong had them, Rong could become first wife. Rong looked at her out of the sides of her eyes.

"Oh, Rong, put your arm around me," Tu Fei said. "We'll go slowly to your house. I knew we shouldn't have gone out without

a maid or two. It's my fault; I convinced you to come." Tu Fei shook her head. Tu Fei was crying slightly. Rong hated herself for distrusting her. Tu Fei had always been kind to her, from the beginning. It was like her own smallness to distrust Tu Fei.

Another contraction -- Rong had thought she was finished with them for now. Tu Fei held her tighter. When they reached the steps Tu Fei yelled for the maids. Her voice sounded hysterical. Rong began to feel this was another accelerated, dreamlike time, like when her feet had been bound, or when her marriage had been consummated.

When Rong reached the kang she collapsed on it. Hui Pui gawked, more frightened than even on her first day, behind the old fanner who was the family's chief midwife. Rong was not sure she trusted her tired old eyes. But her voice was soft and sure, now that she wasn't with the intimidating old mistress. Her hands looked strong; they were large and gnarled, practiced.

Tu Fei paced. Rong could see her in her side-vision, and wondered why she was so upset. Tu Fei wasn't the one experiencing pain. But through the aching, Rong felt strong and glad. It was an honor to lie here, a miracle. The spirits of the earth were giving her a soul. How could it be? She imagined a handsome son on her breast. Yi would venerate her; even the old mistress would be pleased.

The old mistress had started smoking opium since her husband died; her feistiness had left, along with her interest in the family. Chung Ho now made all major family decisions. Rong wished he at least knew of her state at this moment. She wished

Yi knew too; she felt the child belonged to both of them. Of course, her feeling for Yi was nothing like what she felt for Chung Ho, but it was strong, nevertheless.

She could not think anymore; the pain pushed her down, in out. The midwife's voice kept her focused, safe. She held the voice. It was a bright thread in the midst of pulsing night.

The baby lay on her breast, small and red, with thick, matted black hair. He was hot, and breathed heavily. Rong looked at him, amazed. She had never felt such happiness. She saw herself holding him, watching him, for years. What would he be like? He did not look like any of them yet, with his chubby, scrunched face. Rong caressed his hair. It was unbelievably soft. She lay into the bed, relaxed and satisfied, smiling slightly.

"He's beautiful, Rong," Tu Fei said. She had come up on Rong silently. Rong saw her blush. Her face looked tired and old, with dark circles and sharp angles. Rong had never seen her look this way before.

Looking at her, Rong saw tears coming into Tu Fei's eyes. Rong looked away, stretching self-consciously. Again, she doubted Tu Fei. Rong glanced at Tu Fei from the side, watching Tu Fei examine the baby with her eyes. Rong gave the baby to Tu Fei, whose arms shook as she accepted him.

"Oh, Rong," Tu Fei said brokenly, as she rocked the child. She put him down carefully beside Rong, and she and Rong stared at each other. Quivering a little, they hugged. Rong was not sure

who had started it. Tu Fei's arms felt soft but strong around her. She felt buoyant and alert, she smiled at Tu Fei as they came apart.

"You smile beautifully," Tu Fei said softly, looking down.

Rong's eyebrows raised. A compliment from the lovely Tu Fei! Rong wondered if she did smile beautifully.

"Yi will be proud of this child," said Tu Fei, nodding.

Rong smiled slightly. Did Tu Fei know she had wanted Chung Ho, not Yi, as the boy's father? How sweet it would be to elicit Tu Fei's comfort. No, it would be both bad manners and too risky. Though trustworthy, Tu Fei could not be expected to keep secrets from her husband.

These were Western barbarians, then. A tall lady in a yellow feathered hat and a drab skirt brushed against Rong. The barbarian's outfit was cut to immodest tightness around the breasts, and ballooned strangely from the waist, as though the hidden legs were gargantuan. Rong caught a musty whiff of the barbarian and felt like sneezing. The barbarian did not apologize for bumping into Rong. Rong raised her eyebrows. She felt hot surges of hate for the woman. She hoped the woman would be humiliated one day.

She could imagine her ordering Chinese girls to give her their menstrual blood, her eerie blue eyes remote, and her hands clutching them as though they were reptiles. Rong shivered. Yi had told her about what missionaries did; he had shown her the pamphlets he had written against them. She clutched her baby tight. Never would they steal him for their evil ceremonies. Orphans, indeed! She was glad they hadn't been allowed to live here when she was a child.

Chung Ho sat writing, his back to her, at the end of the long, cold hall. She felt small as she walked towards him, but important because of her child. She tried to walk proudly, but her eyes remained on the flowered carpet; she wondered if she would still feel as intensely towards him as she had a year ago.

The baby woke and cried. She soothed him; she could reach him, but his world was his own. This was fine. She remembered her days alone on the marsh, satisfied.

She heard Chung Ho walking towards them and could no longer soothe the child naturally. She held him still and tried to smile at Chung Ho.

"He's beautiful," Chung Ho said ringingly. He smiled, and touched the child's forehead. "Hello," he said softly. The baby slept, and Rong relaxed.

"Who were those barbarians?" Rong asked. She could not express the emotions she felt on seeing him at last; at one time she had not been able to imagine life without him, and now hers was full, with only passing longing for him. It was better to talk of news.

"Ah, they're regulars here. You should visit me more often." Chung Ho focused on a point on the ceiling.

"What were they here for?"

"Oh, never mind. Ask your husband." Chung Ho hummed at the baby, who didn't respond.

"Hui Pui, my maid, said that last night a missionary was killed. A mob, led by gentry, attacked him in front of his house."

"Why ask me, if you already know about it? No, wait, I'm sorry to be harsh. This has been a difficult week."

They stood awkwardly. How odd, Rong thought, that she could think of nothing to say to someone who meant so much to her.

Chung Ho sat down. The lines around his mouth had deepened, and his skin was drier and looser than she remembered.

Pi, a thin yamen runner, ran in, shaking a little. "Wo Hi saw the missionaries send a messenger to their consul in Canton. They will send gunboats! Should we waylay him?"

Chung Ho shrugged and waved his crutch. "Yet another bind. Chuang Tzu is right again, alas."

Rong cocked her head.

"Yes, waylay him. That will postpone the invasion; we will have a few more days of peace to cherish."

Rong hugged her baby. Yi was a warlord; no one would dare attack him. "They must be fools," Rong said.

"Have you ever seen a gunboat?" Chung Ho shook his head.

"Yi told me he has 800 trained soldiers. They know the terrain; they beat the Taipings. The Westerners will die."

Chung Ho shrugged.

"What do we do, then, Rong? This missionary was a good enough man, though arrogant. He had tea with me the other day. He hates Chinese. I could see it when he smiled at me or one of my retainers, as though he wanted to throw up. He forced himself to stay here, to work at what his odd ethics dictate. He will destroy us if he can; the gentry are right. But he doesn't mean to. He thinks he will improve our lives. He's just another good Confucian, although he doesn't know it." Chung Ho shook his head.

Rong just looked at Chung Ho. She did not know what to say to him. He had lost his happiness. Tears were coming; she did not want them, and that made her angry.

"I'm sorry, Chung Ho," she said haltingly. She met his eyes, bleary and sharp, and looked down quickly at the carpet.

He waved his hand, as though all they had felt together signified nothing.

"I hear you've been going to a Buddhist temple with Tu Fei, Rong."

"Yes, she's an ardent believer."

"And you, being like myself, are unsure what you believe."

Chung Ho always said what he should leave implied; it was good to feel he still knew her, however.

"My father was a magistrate who went to Taoist temples on holidays. He could laugh at paradoxes. I once could; perhaps I will again after Mother dies. It took me a while after my leg was cut off to learn to laugh again; I'll be fine. I suggest you and Yi leave and stay away for a few months. The Westerners know the gentry are behind missionary killings. They enjoy revenge."

Rong's hands seemed stuck around the baby. She did not know how to comfort Chung Ho. Her stomach contracted painfully; people would be killed again, maybe even Chung Ho. She would get her son out of the way; he would not ever see the violence she had. He would know food and sleep and love all his days, if she could help it. She picked him up and sidled out the door. Chung Ho, his eyes closed, did not seem to notice them leave. Outside, the air stirred, as though waking. The sky hurt her eyes with its blueness. She hugged the soft child and bounced him. What kind of day had Tu Fei and Yi had?

"So you visited Chung Ho today?" Yi said.

Rong could tell he was trying to seem offhand.

"He said we should go to the mountains for a few weeks," Rong said.

"My elder brother forgets that I'm a man now, a powerful, deliberate one."

Rong shrugged. Yi could be stubborn when he felt insulted.

"Chung Ho retains his Taoist pacifism. He doesn't see what a threat these missionaries are to us," Yi said, shaking his head. "Why, they're telling our tenants that the Christian God, not our emperor, and not their landlords, is their supreme ruler. They get rice from the missionaries and forget to plant their own fields. We'll have another Taiping revolution on our hands before long, and this time, the rabble will have barbarian gunboats to back them. I hate the foreign devils' colorless eyes, and arrogance. Why, just yesterday one of them took a rickshaw from under my nose. I nearly ran him through, but told myself to wait. I have relished each hour of waiting."

He was still the Yi who polemicized against the Taipings, who ran away to fight them. He looked out the window, then paced around his desk, looking at diagrams from all angles. His brows were knit, his eyes shining. Rong looked around the room, at its silk scrolls and ancient porcelain vases. Yi had always been able to give up comfort and beauty easier than war. He had been several years without a war. Hunting animals, and drilling his men was not enough. Rong tried to see the diagrams without moving; she could not. She had always wondered what the houses of the barbarians looked like. No use trying to convince Yi of anything. No one could.

Yi straightened the diagrams. "I'm off," he said smiling. "Oh, did you enjoy seeing Chung Ho after so long?" His eyes widened and he looked down.

"Of course," Rong said, picking up her embroidery. "He was

taken with the baby."

Yi smiled. "Good!" He looked at her. "Would you still rather it be his?" Yi's voice trailed off.

Rong blushed. She did not know what to say.

Tu Fei swept in, like a graceful bird. "Well, Rong, have you convinced him that it's time we take a trip?" Tu Fei laughed.

Yi turned towards the wall.

Tu Fei looked at Rong, raising her eyebrows. Rong shrugged.

"No is the answer," Rong said softly. "No to both your questions."

Yi whirled. He stood erectly, tall, and smiled. His eyes glittered indomitably, like the spring dragon's.

"It's decided, Tu Fei," he said. "We go to the mountains day after tomorrow."

"Is he sleeping, Hui Pui?" Rong asked absently. She pricked her finger with the embroidery needle.

"He looks as happy as a brook after the ice has melted," Hui Pui said, smiling into the cradle.

"My, you've been getting literary, Hui Pui, since Rong's been teaching you to write," said Tu Fei, smiling.

Hui Pui nodded. She looked pleased. "I want to announce a farewell poetry-writing contest, to take place this afternoon," Tu Fei said, clearing her throat.

"Oh, I'm not good enough for that," Hui Pui said shrilly shaking her head.

"We'll give ourselves handicaps to compensate for our experience," Tu Fei said. "Don't be shy, Hui Pui."

"Right," Rong said. She was glad Tu Fei liked Hui Pui.

"We'll see," said Hui Pui quietly. "I'll try. But only if Yi won't be coming."

"Well Yi is coming," said Tu Fei, shrugging. We all leave for the mountains, afterwards. I don't know why you should mind him. He's always kind to you."

Hui Pui blushed. Had Yi been trying to seduce the girl? Rong hoped not, but there was nothing she could do, if he had. If she sold Hui Pui, who knew how the buyer would treat her? Yi would at least be generous. Rong looked at Hui Pui carefully. Hui Pui continued to blush as she rocked the child. Her expression was soft, not resistant. Perhaps Hui Pui looked at Yi as Rong had at Chung Ho? That would explain her questions about him. Rong had through she just asked them to pass the time.

"Madam," gasped the old, brown fanner-servant, as she strode into the room. She knelt before Tu Fei; it irritated Rong that servants always recognized Tu Fei first.

"The door-keeper, you know, old Fu, who smokes a lot, had word from a coolie that Yi was killed this afternoon in a riot at the missionary compound." The fanner glanced quickly at Tu Fei then prostrated herself.

Hui Pui screamed and ran from the room. Tu Fei's mouth hung open.

Rong sat still, wishing she could hide. She smelled opium on the fanner. It could not be true; Yi, who had survived the war,

killed by ridiculous foreigners? He should have obeyed Chung Ho and stayed in the country with them. But Yi always had to be in the center of action.

"Oh, Rong, what will we do?" Tu Fei stood and paced. Tears poured from her eyes.

Rong watched her. She realized that Tu Fei, who had no sons, would lose all status if Yi were really dead. With money tight because of the mistress' opium habit, Tu Fei would be especially in jeopardy. Tu Fei would be sent home to her family, which would be a disgrace she did not deserve. Rong had a son; she would be tolerated. But now that the old lady would have access to Yi's private funds, what would be left for her son to inherit? Rong hated the old lady. Of course, there was nothing legal that Chung Ho could do. Still, she wished he could rule the old lady subtly, while paying her proper outward respect.

Chung Ho stood at the door, shaking slightly. How quickly he responded to her thoughts!

"I am heartily sorry," he said, first bowing to Tu Fei, and then to Rong. He looked at Rong as though she were merely Yi's wife. Rong squinted at him. He sat down stiffly. Despite his Taoist training, he did not take disasters impassively. But Yi was his only brother; he had played with him, cared for him, from birth. He held his head in his hands. Looking at him, Tu Fei began to cry, and fled the room. Rong felt like holding him, as she had held Yi many times.

He no longer seemed wise and perfect. He seemed younger and more vulnerable than she.

He looked at her searchingly.

"You're stronger than I thought, Rong," he said. "You didn't care for Yi too much, I know, but I expected tears of fear." He pointed at the door through which Tu Fei had fled.

Rong shrugged.

"You do have as much to lose as she, after all," Chung Ho said softly. "I heard from the upper secretary that Yi's land and goods will be confiscated, as punishment. The government is like our family, grasping at gnats to feed itself."

Rong's eyes widened. "But, surely the family will give us a stipend from communal funds?"

Chung Ho shook his head. "Those funds depended on Yi's."

Chung Ho was skillful at dispossessing her suddenly. Rong bit her lips. He seemed reluctant and impotent.

"You could go back to the monastery, if you want," Chung Ho said. "I'm sure Chan would be glad to have you. I hear, though, that the place is poor. The gentry are afraid to leave their homes; they're afraid of bandits and stray Taiping remnants. They hoard their money for the hard times they know are coming."

Rong shook her head. "I'll think of somewhere to go," she said.

He shrugged.

"When misfortune comes, it doesn't feel the way the Taoists say it should," Rong said, smiling slightly. She looked down. "After a while, though, you gain the confidence Sui Po had. I know I'll be all right, or relatively all right." She wished to mention her son, but for some reason, could not. Her mind awakened with ideas -- she could go to Tu Fei's house, or home -- yes, home. She could farm again, if the land were still untaken. If

she sold her jewelry, she'd have enough money to buy new land. The land would not go away, no matter who governed, who fought. If drought came she might have to leave it temporarily, but it would always be there, as it was there now, waiting wordlessly for her. She looked at Chung Ho. His face had become just a face; the eyes no longer touched and aroused her. She looked at him questioningly; he looked down. No, he would stay here and be ruined with his mother.

"I'm going to go get out my mourning clothes," Rong said. "After the period of mourning, I'll be going home."

"Yes," Chung Ho said, looking at her intensely. "You'll do very well there." And perhaps sometimes you'll send me a poem?"

"Of course," Rong said huskily. She felt moved like she had been in the old times. No one else had known her so completely, and approved of what he knew.

From inside her sedan chair Rong smelled fresh mossiness she remembered from childhood. She breathed it deeply. Her son, on her lap, moved his small fingers in sleep. He felt warm and reassuringly heavy on her. She was glad of his weight, his health. He woke and started to scream as they climbed a hill. Rong could hear that the rickshaw men they had rented unbelievably cheaply were laboring. She wondered how Tu Fei, ahead of her as was proper, was feeling after six hours on the dusty road, this third day of travel. Tu Fei hopefully would like the country life. Rong thought Tu Fei would, after she got used to taking care of herself

without maids, and to helping in the fields when she could. These chairs would be their last, decorous extravagance. The old mistress had paid for them, with patronizing insistence. Rong recalled walking from the other direction, and realized how lucky they were. She wondered whether Tu Fei could have made it. But Tu Fei was acting much stronger than Rong had expected; she never complained, and talked optimistically of their new life.

Rong suddenly knew the glade they had reached. It was the sacred place, the place of the priestess. Rong sat back behind the curtains. Up the road walked a priestess. Was it the same one? She was old enough. Her long grey hair spread behind her in the wind. She strode with her arms hanging freely, her head up. Her face was wrinkled, tree-like. Her eyes pushed out more forcefully than they had. Rong felt her old yearning to touch her, to follow her and learn what she could learn. The Taipings had not changed her feeling that the gods and spirits of the land were the fundamental ones, who cried and sang and danced. They felt what the people felt; they were the people. The people dreamt of ghostly long nails in their necks, and the people sometimes put their nails in each other's necks.

The priestess was the voice of the spirits; she had not cursed Rong's village; they spirits had. The Manchus had been corrupt, and even the Taipings had looted and maimed. Nature became angry. Rong saw the dying priest, blood gurgling from where a piece of Buddha stuck in his lip. He became Chung Ho, staring at a delicate leaf drawn on a piece of silk in his spare office. Under Chung Ho's window, Yi bawled at his soldiers.

Chung Ho put his head in his hands and paced. The curse was played out; Rong was certain, not unsure and afraid, as she once had been. She saw its end in Tu Fei and her son's clear eyes. When curses returned, she would wait them out, wait for this moment of light.

Rong called to the carriers to stop. They did, grumbling. Tu Fei looked back at her, eyebrows up and head tilted. Rong beckoned to her to get down, as she descended herself, holding the baby carefully. She told the youngest bearer to run after the priestess.

The priestess frowned at her, and Rong smiled, hoping to show her she meant only good. The priestess looked at her skeptically, then began to walk towards them.

"Bless my son," Rong said softly, looking into the priestess' wet, black eyes in deep sockets.

"And for how much?" The priestess looked at the child calculatingly.

"One silver coin." Rong gulped; that was one-tenth of her savings. She looked at the priestess steadily.

The priestess nodded. She moved in a businesslike way, setting up the fire. Rong moved nearby. Tu Fei, who had looked puzzled and impatient at first, now stood calmly, looking as serious as she had at Yi's funeral.

Rong handed her son to the priestess without hesitation. The priestess held him high in smoke that parted damp air. He screamed, a loud, searing scream. Rong's chest tightened as the sound pulled at her, and she breathed quickly. As the priestess lowered him and he quieted, Rong could tell they all, even the

bearers, felt a sighing in the air, as though all that existed knew he would grow and accepted him.

- End -

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